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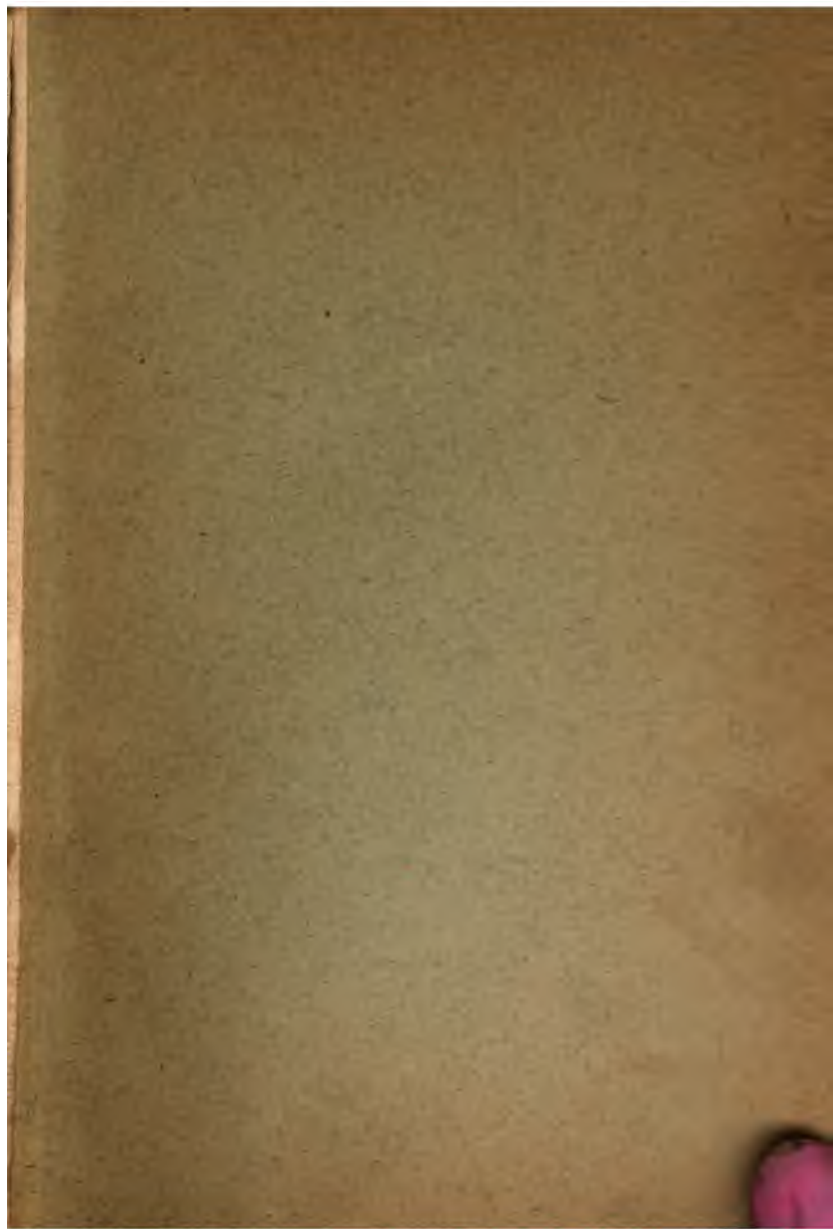
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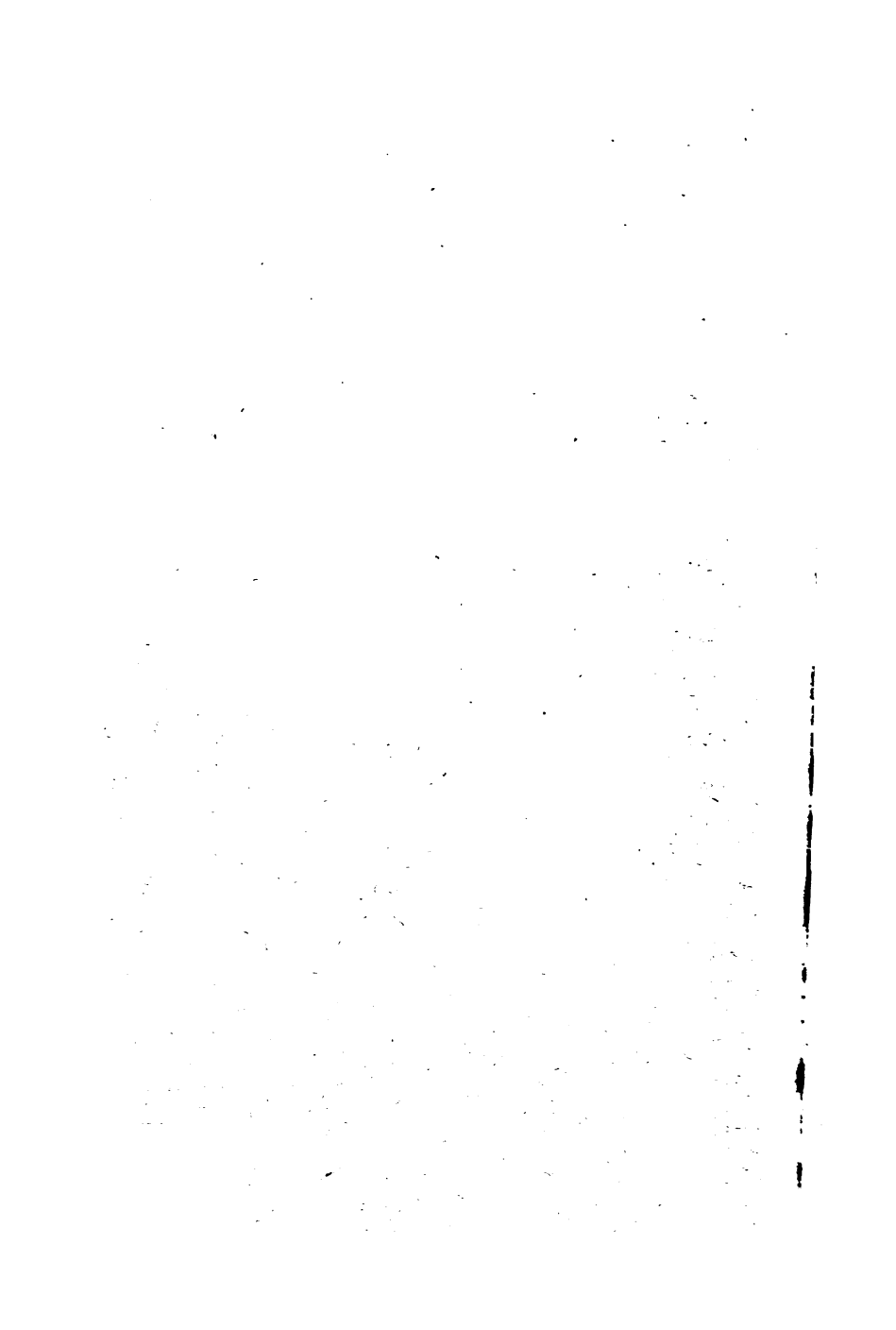
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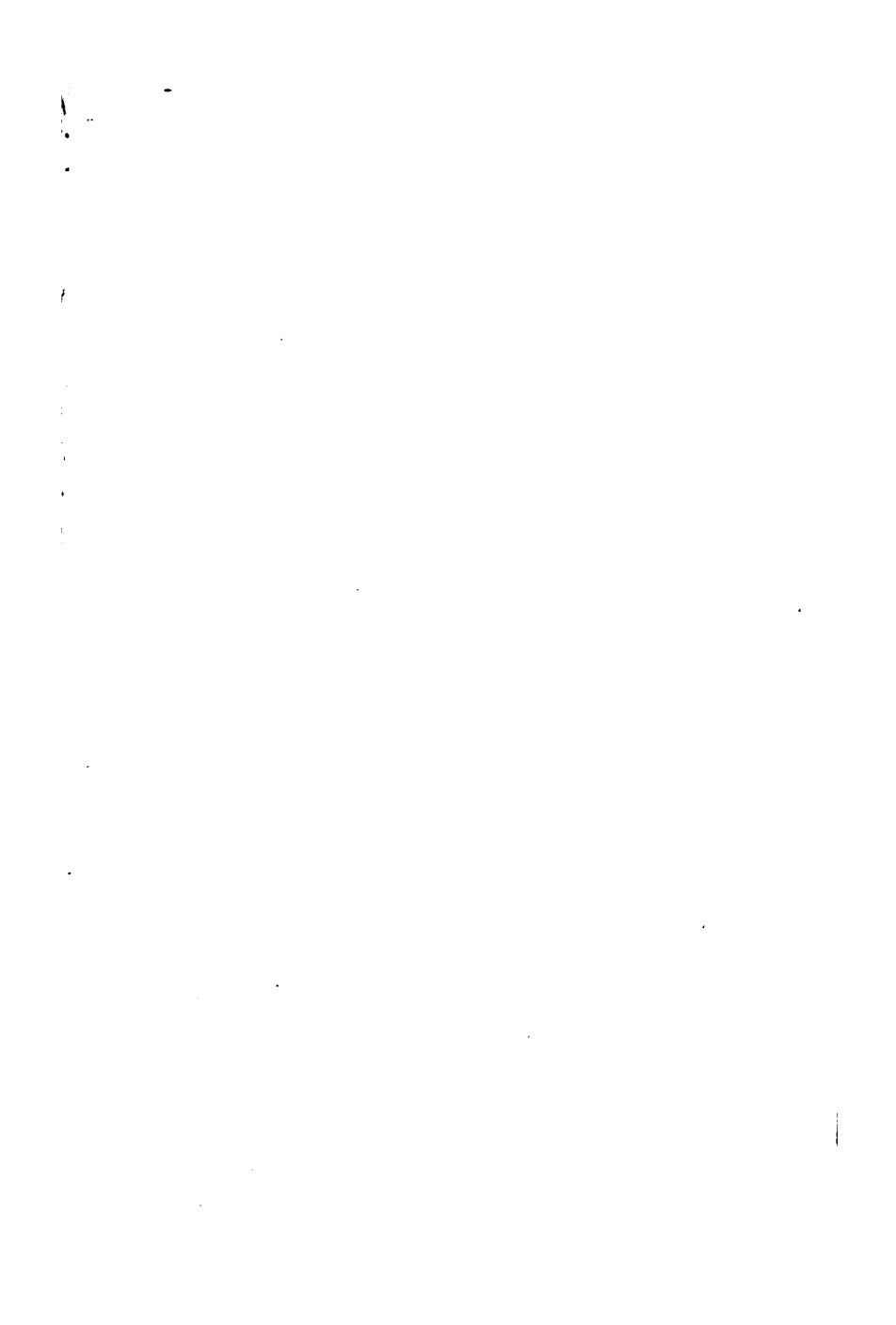


A
LOST
ENDEAVOUR



"RAIN, RAIN, & SUN! A RAINBOW ON THE LEA!
AND TRUTH IS THIS TO ME, & THAT TO THEE;
AND TRUTH OR CLOTHED OR NAKED LET IT BE"







She was on the ground again, rocking herself to and fro
Frontispiece.



A LOST ENDEAVOUR

BY GUY BOOTHBY
AUTHOR OF "A BID FOR
FORTUNE"



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY STANLEY L. WOOD

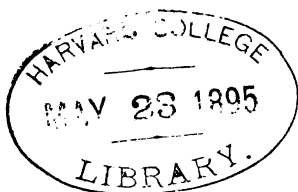
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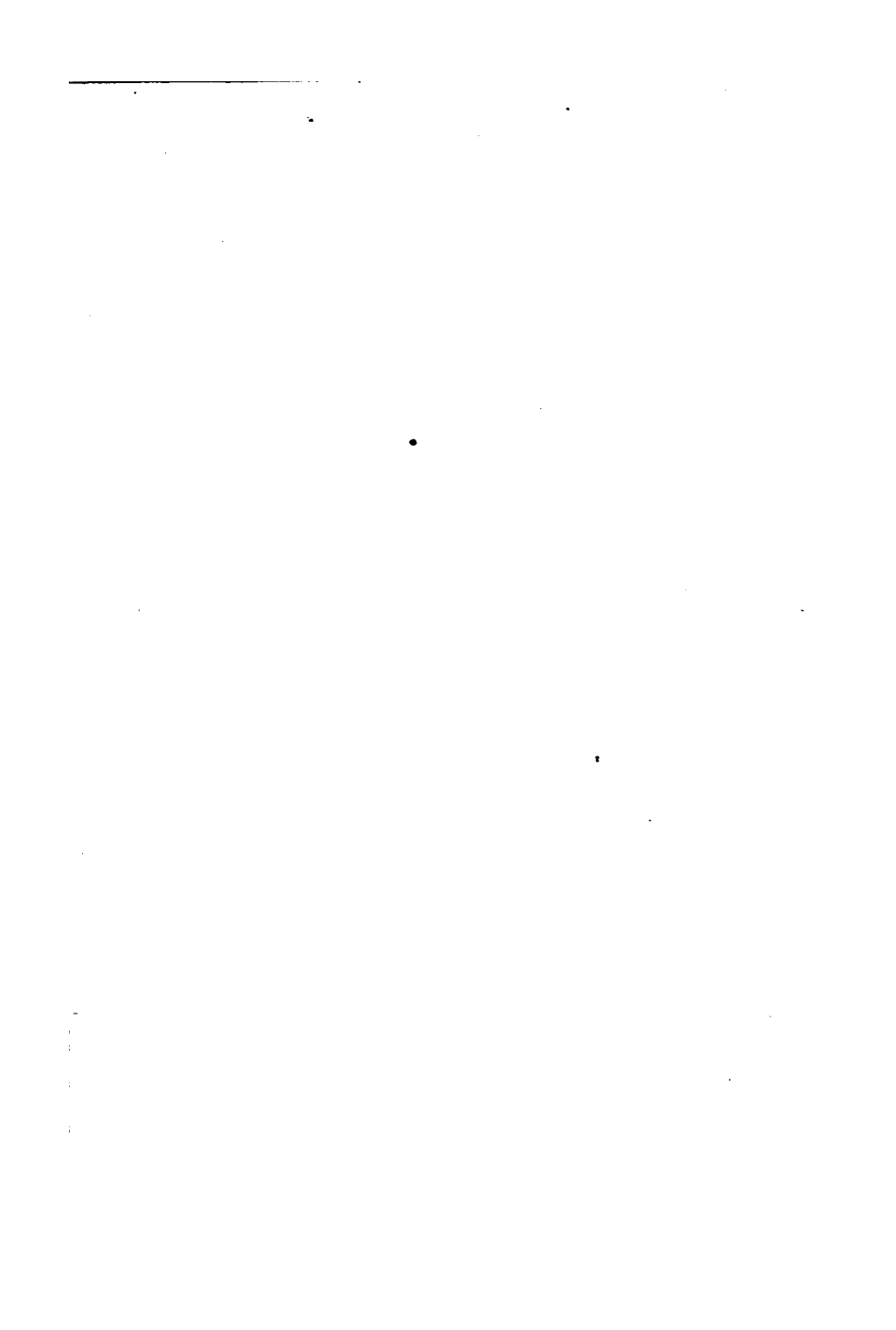
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J. S. Cushing & Co. — Berwick & Smith.
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I INSCRIBE THIS BOOK

To My Uncle

HENRY HODDING

AS A MARK OF MY SINCERE AFFECTION
AND ADMIRATION

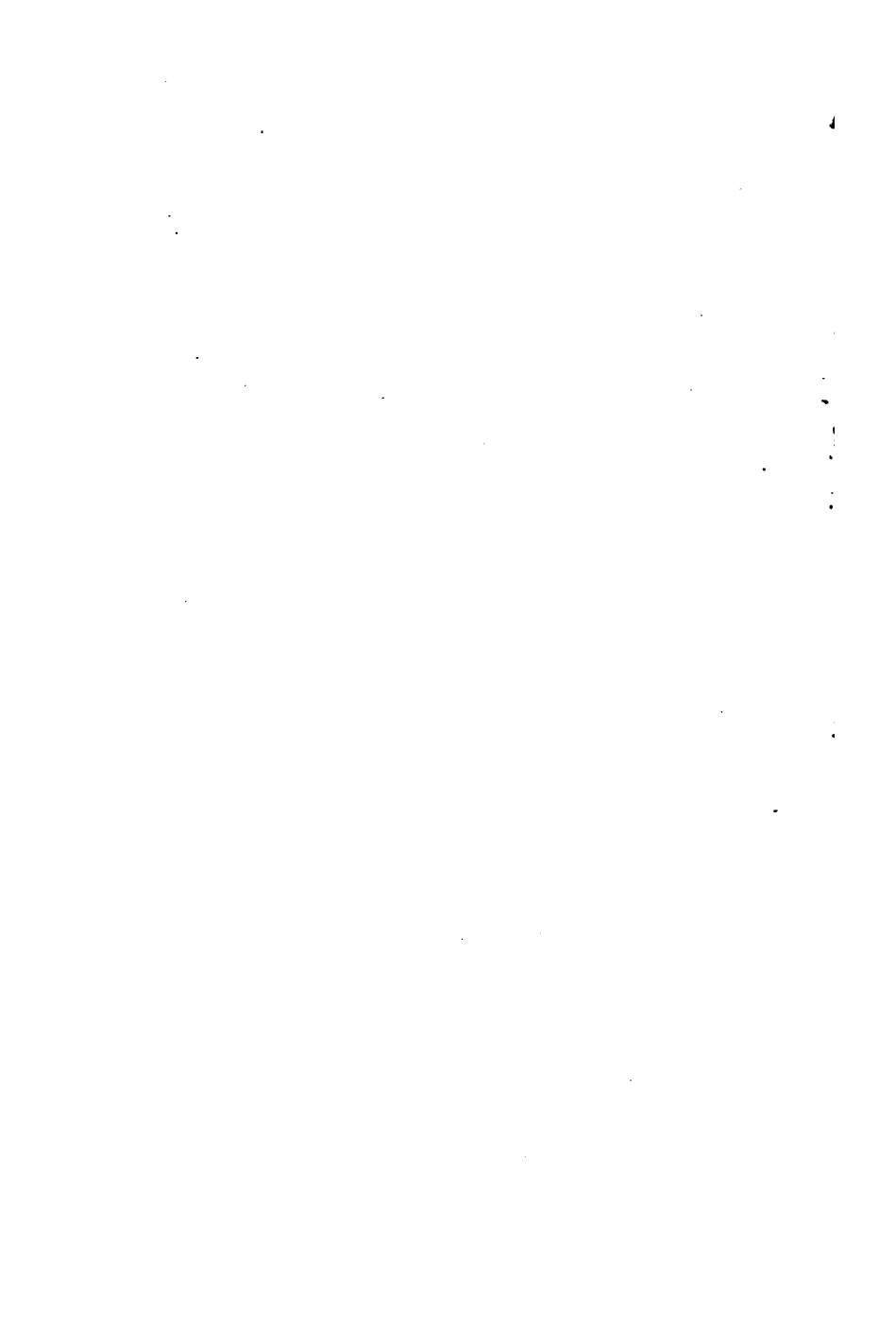


CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	I
CHAPTER	
I. THE FIRST DAY	8
II. THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY	28
III. TEN DAYS LATER	53
IV. THE FOURTEENTH DAY	64
V. THE SAME DAY	81
VI. THE EIGHTH WEEK	100
VII. THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY	122
VIII. FIFTEEN DAYS LATER	140
IX. A DAY LATER	157
X. THE NINETIETH DAY	174

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
✓ SHE WAS ON THE GROUND AGAIN, ROCKING HERSELF TO AND FRO	<i>Fronti-piece</i>
✓ GARFITT HAD RISEN AND WAS NOW LEANING AGAINST THE PACKING-CASE TABLE	35
✓ "I DEFY YOU AND ALL THE OTHERS TO MOVE ME" .	127
✓ SHE HALF STOOD, HALF CROUCHED AGAINST THE WINDOW	179



INTRODUCTION

MOST Gentle Reader, it is in my mind that I would like to take you up bodily and carry you off to Thursday Island, that quaint and but little known land spot peering up out of the green seas that separate New Guinea from the most northerly coast line of Australia.

It is the very earliest moment of the day there, half night, half morning; that shadowy border-land lying between both; just the strangest, uncanniest, Mother-of-Pearl dawn imaginable, in which everything, even the most insignificant object, seems to take a shape and colour quite separate and distinct from that worn by it in the sober, matter-of-fact glare of mid-day.

The settlement, with its multifarious population, usually so noisy, is very quiet; quiet almost as the water of the Bay, which is like glass, undisturbed by even the faintest ripple. Only an hour or so before, a crowd of Pearlers, in a neighbouring drinking house, were making

night hideous with their wild sea chanties; now even they have reeled home, and we seem to have the world entirely to ourselves.

Having dressed, we seat ourselves in our friend's verandah, and look down, by way of a quaint little wooden street, at the harbour, across which the faint outline of the Australian coast will presently be peeping up.

Without doubt we have every prospect of a hot day before us, but just now, after the sweltering night through which we have passed, it is more than pleasant to sit absorbing the quiet and the cool, undisturbed. In order, perhaps, that we may not experience any feeling of loneliness, a little dawn wind comes up to us from the great Pacific, whispers among the long green leaves of a plantain growing beside the verandah, and then goes its way round the hill side, to set the luggers rocking in the Bay below. The plantain, in her turn, repeats the message, something about coral reefs and blue seas, if I mistake not, to a neighbouring palm, who curtsies an appreciative reply. Then a long, dry leaf that we can only hear, falls with a faint dreamy rustle to the ground, to be there caught up by the frolic wind, and carried out into the centre of the dusty street, where it lies

hopelessly stranded and alone, an object both for pity and for ridicule. At first we are hardly conscious why we notice these things, so insignificant in themselves, but we soon come to see that it is because they blend so harmoniously into the faint perfume of baked earth and withered palm leaves that pervades everything. And, now we think of it, even that perfume is not without its charm, an indefinable something, that has almost a note of pathos in it. It rises before us like an echo of the dead and half forgotten Past, a vague sadness that we would not for worlds be without. As someone suggests, it is like the remembrance of a joy that has been, overpowering the bitterness of some sorrow of the present.

Not a living soul is visible; that is if we except a monster tortoiseshell cat, who making her appearance from among the piles of a neighbouring house, springs into our verandah, and comes stealthily towards us, purring all the time. But as we stoop to caress her, a Kanaka turns out into the verandah of his residence further along the street, and investigates the weather. When he retires satisfied, a thread of palest blue smoke rises into the still air, to hang a moment there before drifting off

into the more perfect blue beyond. Another follows it and yet another, till as many as a dozen fairy columns may be counted.

Then just as we are losing ourselves in contemplation of these things, our host emerges from his room, clad in perfect white from top to toe. His appearance is always fascinating, but this morning it is, if possible, even more so than usual. There is a flavour of All the East in his attire, a wealth of oriental reminiscence in the broad brimmed panama upon his head, and the scarlet cumerabund that bounds his ample waist. He is a strange person, this host of ours, a man of vast and peculiar knowledge, one who knows his world thoroughly, who has accumulated multitudinous experiences, and one who has endless queer stories of Life and Death to tell.

He bids us "good-morning," and instinctively we rise and follow him across the verandah and down the steps into the dusty street. Then we head east towards the extremity of the Island, towards a house that we can only just see, a particular, a special house, of which last night we heard much, and which we are now visiting purely at our own request.

Reaching the hill, we bear slightly to our left

hand, in order to ascend it. The road, by which we have hitherto travelled, no longer arrogates to itself the dignity of a recognised footway, but is only a faint track, circling in and out amongst attenuated palms and dust laden Castor Oil bushes. The stillness is most remarkable.

Half way up the hill we pause to look down upon the settlement and its peaceful harbour. Already a decided glow warms the eastern heavens. We reflect sorrowfully that it will not be very long now before the sun rises, and noting this, we resume our march, not to stop again until we are at our destination.

Imagine a long, low, wooden structure, of one storey, roofed with shingles and surrounded on all sides by a deep verandah; the latter, almost covered by luxuriant creepers, whose sinuous arms have penetrated into every nook and cranny, looks out on to what was once a carefully tended garden, but is now only a hopeless waste of weeds and tropical profusion. Let the house be backed by a towering hill, and fronted by the tiny settlement, the harbour, and the adjacent islands. Then, if you have realized all this, you will have in your mind some notion of the place to which, with so much circumlocution, we have journeyed.

With a feeling that is akin to awe we follow our guide into the deserted dwelling. It is all so still that the very hush of the outside world seems noise within its walls.

The first room leading off the verandah is destitute of furniture, or indeed any sign of having ever been in human occupation. It clanks and resounds to our footsteps as we enter. To assist us in our search the light of sunrise steals in through the eastern window, and reveals what? Only a big green frog seated in the centre of the floor, regarding us with soulless eyes. Leaving him in undisturbed possession, we explore the other rooms where a surprise is in store for us! Unlike the first, these are completely furnished, and with a taste that is as unusual in the Island, as its presence there is unexpected. The rooms are three in number, and each is just as the last occupants left it. But time and the climate have worked their wicked wills upon them. All three are alike, equally mildewed, and equally forsaken. The ghost of a mysterious, an awful Past seems to have laid its icy finger upon this deserted dwelling. An infinite sadness reigns throughout it.

And does nothing but the furniture remain to tell of those who once were happy here?

Nothing ! But stay, we are wrong. When we say nothing, we forget that in one room, upon a window ledge, coated with dust, but otherwise just as they were thrown down, we noticed a tiny thimble and a piece of cambric, in which the rusty needle was still imbedded. Could anything be more lonesome? Could anything be more sad? For that is all ! All that remains to us, tangible to the touch, of the tragedy of this long deserted house ! We leave the place oppressed with a feeling of intense melancholy.

Passing out again we choose another path and visit the cemetery on the hill. Here our guide points out to us a grave. No marble monument marks the spot. Only a simple wooden cross, erected by some humble sympathiser, stands at the head ; and even that is barren of inscription.

Just as we reach it a gleam of sunshine penetrates the spot and kisses the narrow resting place. The dawn wind sweeps through the long grass, sighs among the trees, and then dies away completely. It is growing far too warm for walking. Let us turn back to our verandah, and as we go we will try and induce our host to show us the connection between this grave and the silent house upon the hill.

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST DAY

"Le désespoir comble non seulement notre misère, mais notre faiblesse." — VAUVENARGUES.

THE ribbon of dusty road, if road indeed it can be called, which begins at the old graveyard among the mangroves, on the East side of Port Kennedy, and comes to an abrupt termination among the Castor Oil bushes near the Jesuits' house on the West, lay all dazzling white in the pitiless glare of the morning sun.

It was the very middle of the hot weather, and the presence of that road seemed to dominate everything; its influence was upon the whole settlement. There was its own dust upon the track, there was equally much dust from it off the track; a dejected palm on the right was coated with it, as also was a hedge of malignant Aloes on the left. No man walked along it without a malediction, and even a green lizard, wending his way homeward through the

dry grass beside it, carried some of its grit upon his back.

The heat was terrific, and as if to add still further to the peculiar misery of the scene, a whirling, skirling dust-devil formed itself opposite Shanghai Pete's Store, and went hurtling away across country, to break with a long sustained moan on the open block behind Tommy Ah Foo's Billiard Saloon in Main Street. A blinding heat haze held all the worn out land, and in this everything, hills, houses, and harbour, seemed to dance and quiver.

It was close upon noon, and the Township was very quiet. A few pearling luggers rode at anchor in the harbour, a British India Mail-boat was drawn up alongside the hulk, and a missionary schooner from New Guinea was going about on her last board to her anchorage near the new jetty. A small knot of Kanakas were discussing her movements in subdued voices from a corner verandah on the sea-front, and a dog was scratching up the dust near Hong-Kong Joe's boat building yard. That was all, save the smell of the scorched earth which was upon, around, and above everything.

Presently a man turned the corner from China Town and came slowly along the road. The

haze danced and swung round him, and the dust he created closed in upon the view behind him like a pall. He was a white man, and an Englishman; that, at least, was unmistakable; very tall, very narrow shouldered, prematurely old, and painfully thin. His face was pinched and haggard, his hair was sparse and very gray over the temples, but his eyes, which were large though much sunken, shone with a wonderful brilliance. Many might have called him handsome; all must have admitted the refinement of his features. But he walked like a man dazed, with the air of one who had received a heavy blow and had not yet recovered from the shock of it. Twice in the short distance, that separated the corner from the first foot bridge, he staggered, and once he almost fell. As he recovered himself he smiled in a strange fashion, and murmured something in a tongue that betrayed an education which was neither consistent with his poverty stricken appearance nor indeed his very presence in the Island.

But though he made his way in a definite direction, he seemed hardly to be conscious of his actions. For when his hat fell off and rolled into the cactus hedge, he would have let it lie there, and gone on his way bareheaded, had he

not been called upon to stop by a man coming down the side track from the cemetery. The new comer was a young man, five and twenty at most, with a strange, clear cut, ascetic face, dressed entirely in white, and wearing a broad brimmed straw hat upon his head.

He picked the other's head gear out of the dust, and, having brushed it, handed it to him. As he did so he sighed heavily.

"Garfitt, Garfitt," he said reproachfully, "I know your trouble, but I did not think it would come to this!"

For a moment the other did not vouchsafe any reply, then he said quietly—

"I assure you you are altogether in error, Padre. The pity is that you have no knowledge of my case. But, now I come to think of it, this is well met, excellently well met! I have a quotation saving up in the lumber room of my memory for you. Construe me this—

*'Nec quae praeteriit, iterum revocabitur unda;
Nec, quae praeteriit, bora redire potest—'*

As he spoke he reeled and would have fallen had not the other stretched out his arm and saved him.

"Garfitt, you know as well as I do that you

are talking arrant nonsense! What do you mean by it?"

"Happiness, Padre! Nescio qua praeter solitum dulcedine laeti! That's what it is. Sheer, undiluted, uncontrovertible happiness. Happiness that nothing can destroy and none take away. In other words, Parson, I've learnt my fate!"

"Steady, man, steady! You're shaking like the palsy. Pull yourself together and tell me all about it. You're not drunk, but it's easily seen you've been drinking!"

"That's just the awful pity of 'it. In my present state drink has no effect upon me. My gracious, if I could only get decently, happily drunk, what a relief it would be. But after all, I don't know that it matters; I have other consolations. You see the end is coming at last!"

"What end?"

"As if you don't know! Why, the end of all things, Hamlet's fell sergeant, Death! The snuffing out of my candle. Look at my hands. Look at my eyes — my cheeks! Look at the stains on this dish clout I dignify with the name of a handkerchief. I tell you I've learnt my fate. I'm given the end of my tether, and what's the result? Why, that three months

from to-day, perhaps before, you will be called upon to do your duty by me in the cemetery up yonder! I'm given three months leg rope! You don't seem to realize the delightful certainty of it all!"

"You poor wretch, and you dare to jest over it!"

"Jest? I jest? Not I! This is the most grisly bit of earnest you ever heard of! Man, can't you see all that it means for me? Why, if you could only know the pains I've been at to accumulate sufficient pluck to anticipate it you would not wonder that I hail its approach with so much gladness. Why, I've even gone out of my way so far as to — but there, what boots all this palaver? it's come at last, and to-night I mean to celebrate it. Padre, do you know what I've just done? I've sold the only bit of jewelry that remains to me of my former state, a ring my mother gave me, to raise funds for an orgie to celebrate my release. I've got a reputation in the Island for wildness, but to-night we'll have such a charivari as has never been seen in this rat hole before. You'd better doff your livery and join us. It will be diverting, I assure you — four of us, all in the same plight. Four doomed men! It will

be the Revel of Death with a vengeance, won't it?"

"Garfitt, reflect! Pause before it is too late, I conjure you! If your situation be as desperate as you say, have you no relatives to think of? None with whom you might communicate?"

"Not one. Not a single relative of any sort who would care one jot. No, they'll rejoice, my friend. They'll be glad. Ho! Ho! I fancy I can hear them. Why have I lived here all these long years do you think? Not because I liked Thursday Island? Not because I was building up a fortune here? No, but because I'm forced to it! Because I'm an exile, an out-cast, of less account than even the lepers on the island over yonder! But, d'you know, I'd like to have vengeance on them once. I'd like to do just one little thing to make them squirm!"

"And how much the better would you be for it?"

"I don't want to be the better for it. I don't want to be the better for anything. I just want to die and be out of it all. That's my one and only desire. But come, Padre, you'll join us to-night?"

"Garfitt, will anything I can say or do induce you to forego this act of senseless bravado?"

"Nothing, Padre, unless you can make me believe the truth of your teaching. And even that consolation is denied me. I'm like the man in — but oh, I say, I was forgetting, you didn't construe me those lines, 'Nec, quae prae—'"

But the Padre was gone, speeding down the hill side as fast as his long legs would carry him. Garfitt looked after him and smiled. Then he shrugged his narrow shoulders, and swaying slightly as before, resumed his walk.

It was certainly an awful morning, and the heat seemed to be growing every moment greater. The haze danced and reeled about him, the glare smote his eyes with absolute pain. A clump of aloes by the wayside showed a vivid though dusty green through the shimmering glow as he approached them. But he was not thinking of heat, dust, or aloes. He was gloating over the doom that the only recognised doctor in the settlement had that day pronounced against him. And as he thought of it he rattled the money in his pocket that was to purchase the orgie of the evening.

But something was destined, after all, to prevent the accomplishment of his desires. For passing the clump of aloes, a sound broke upon his ear that occasioned him no little surprise.

It was undoubtedly a sob. And yet who, even in the direst abandonment of grief, would choose such a ghastly place to weep in? He stopped in his walk and looked in the direction whence the sound proceeded. As he did so a woman rose out of the dust like a spirit of the Waste, and confronted him. He gazed at her in complete astonishment. Never in his life before had he seen so wild, so despairing, so altogether strange a creature. She came towards him through the scorching heat, holding out her arms in piteous supplication.

“Charité, Monsieur, pour l’amour de Dieu, charité!”

In a flash the remembrance of her face came back to him. This was the woman he had seen put ashore, on the previous day, by the homeward bound mail-boat as a stowaway. He had witnessed her debarkation, and had callously remarked the insults heaped upon her by the boatmen. In her present outburst of despair, however, he, for a moment, forgot his own unenviable position. But before he could reply to her she had determined that he was unable to assist her, and was on the ground again, rocking herself to and fro, sobbing as before. Garfitt approached her.

"Come, come," he said in French, "this will never do, you know! You must not sit here bareheaded in this blinding sun!"

She looked up at him, and, for the first time, he realized the quaint attractiveness of her face, sodden with grief and begrimed with dust though it was. She paused for a moment, and then, as if to excuse her conduct, said —

"I am homeless, penniless, and starving!"

He nodded his head. He understood exactly. From his pinnacle of despair he could quite appreciate the depth of her loneliness, her poverty, and her hunger. He continued the conversation, this time in a somewhat kindlier tone.

"Pardon me, but I think you were put ashore from the 'Queenslander' yesterday?"

With the remembrance of the indignities shown her on that miserable occasion, she fell again to weeping and wringing her hands. He saw that her nerves were quite unstrung, and that it would be folly, in her present condition, to expect anything like a coherent tale from her. So changing his tone again he continued.

"Have you no friends in the Island? None to whom you can apply for help?"

"I am a stranger, Monsieur, and quite alone in all the world!"

"Well, whatever you are, you must not stay here crying like this! You'll get a sunstroke, to say the least of it!"

She looked up at him and then said quietly —

"Would that be such a very terrible matter, Monsieur?"

The situation was becoming complicated. He felt his peculiar unfitness to conduct the line of argument called for by her last speech. In place of a reply he looked at her again. There was something about her that he could not understand. In his day he had had to do with many women — but never one quite like this. Who and what was she? She certainly had an air of refinement that was woefully at variance with her loneliness and destitution, and he saw that she — but at this point he dropped his speculations, there were other things more important than her culture to be considered. He put his hand into his pocket and fingered the money he had obtained for his ring. It was all he possessed in the world, and what he was to do for more, when that was gone, he could not have said, even had he paused to think of such a thing.

"There's something that will at least help you in the immediate present," he said, handing

her the silver. "Go to Jimmy Way Ling's store on the Sea Front, and tell him John Garfitt sent you. He'll give you the best meal!"

Before she could thank him he had lifted his battered straw hat with the air of a court chamberlain, and resumed his walk towards the white verandah of the Hotel of All Nations. When he reached it he turned to look back at her. The dust by the Aloe clump was settling down again, and he could just discern the slim figure making its way seaward. He smiled as the remembrance of the incident crossed his mind, but the expression faded out of his face as quickly as it had come when he reflected that, by his generosity, he had not only left himself without a penny in the world, but he had also deprived himself of the means of executing the very business which had brought him in that direction. "Well, it had to be done," he told himself apologetically, "I could not have the remembrance of that poor little devil's hungry face upon my conscience."

Whatever else may be said of it, the Hotel of All Nations is at least cosmopolitan in the matter of its habitués. Mail-boat Pilots, Pearl-ers, Owners of beautiful but mysterious schooners, South Sea Traders, Divers, Com-

mercial Travellers, all make it their common rendezvous. From the verandahs, lovely views of the Harbour, of the adjacent islands, and sometimes, that is on clear days, of the mainland of Australia may be obtained; and there, above all other places, stories of life on the under side may be heard, as might be guaranteed to fill the listener with wonderment in no stinted measure.

A number of Pearlers were drinking in the Bar when Garfitt entered. They called upon him to join them. Having complied with their request he made an apology and passed to the letter rack in the hall. It was a long time since he had received a communication from his old world, yet the habit of examining that rack still remained with him. To his surprise, an envelope with his name upon it stared him in the face.

*Mr. John Garfitt,
Thursday Island.*

It was addressed in a handwriting that was so unpleasantly familiar as to cause him to blanch even whiter than before. Pulling it out of the tapes he carried it to the verandah, where he sank into a chair.

"What does it mean?" he asked himself, turning the envelope over and over in his trembling hands. "What reason can he have for writing to me?"

He broke the seal slowly as one who fears he may find an insult, and examined the contents. It ran as follows:—

*Lord John St. Denys Paignton,
Thursday Island,
N. Queensland.*

*Market Chambers, Stepford Basing,
20th November 18—*

My Lord,—It is with extreme regret that I convey to you the sorrowful intelligence of the decease of your much esteemed father, His Grace the Duke of Exminster, which occurred on Thursday, the 15th July last, after an acute illness extending over a period of only three days.

His will has been duly proved, and on behalf of the executors, I have the honour to inform you that under it you benefit to the extent of One Thousand Pounds Sterling. This amount I have to-day, in compliance with the testator's instructions, paid into the Bank of New Holland, with the proviso that it is to

be placed to your credit immediately upon your depositing with the Manager of the branch in Thursday Island, the accompanying document, signed, to the effect that you will never set foot in England during the life of your brother (His Grace, the present Duke).

I am moreover instructed to inform you that a further allowance of One Hundred and Fifty Pounds will be paid to you every half year, commencing on January 1st next, upon the same condition. — I have the honour to be,
Your Lordship's very obedient humble servant,

MATTHEW JAMESON,
Solicitor to the Executors.

Garfitt smoothed the letter carefully out and read it again, with the enclosure. Then he sat looking across the Harbour in a brown study. Presently he said to himself, "And so the unnatural old dog has gone at last, has he? And died without forgiving me! Well, well! He never would believe my version of the story, so I don't know that it matters very much — and yet he was fond of me once — I remember the day he came down to see me at school the term after I got my Remove. . . . We walked across the Playing fields together, his arm

around my neck. . . . Bah! What a fool I am to think of that now! He's gone and I'm going. Going where? I wonder! But there, what does it matter; it puts an end to this life at least! 'Mors laborum ac miserarium quies est!' But there is one thing, by Jove, he has done for me! I'll sign this document, and then to-night we'll be able to have our celebration after all!"

He rose, folded up the papers, put them in his pocket, and went slowly down the hill again towards the Bank. Arriving at the little wicket gate, he paused for a moment. Then having plucked up courage, he crossed the garden and entered the house. Having asked to see the Manager, he was ushered into an inner room. As the door closed upon him two clerks perched on high stools in the office looked at each other and laughed. Everyone in the settlement knew John Garfitt. His excesses, and his ever recurring fits of abject poverty, were as well known as the South West Monsoon.

The Manager motioned him to a seat. It was not the first time by very many, that Garfitt had called upon him; but those visits had been less frequent of late. The Bank was a good distance from his usual haunts, and even

the little naked Kanaka boys on the Beach knew that the man was dying.

"Good-morning, Mr. Garfitt," he said. "What can I do for you? But first let me get you some stimulant. You look utterly worn out!"

"No, thank you, I'm a trifle winded, that's all—your hill is too much for my lung. Now, before I tell you my business, if you don't know it already, I want you to give me a promise. I have with me a paper, which I'm not fool enough to deny means a good deal to me. Some money has been left to me; it has been paid into your Bank, but I am not to be permitted to touch it until I have deposited a certain paper with you, signed. Here is the document! I will attach my signature to it and you can witness it. But before I do so I want you to promise me that my real name and rank shall not go any further. D'you see? I don't want the Settlement to know what a derelict I am! Rather than let that happen I would tear up the paper and forfeit the entire amount. After what you know of me, it may seem strange to you that I should have any pride left, but I suppose we've all got our weak spots somewhere. Can you promise me this?"

"Certainly! I will give you that promise with very much pleasure."

"I am obliged to you. Now I will sign it!"

Garfitt signed the paper and the Manager witnessed it. Then having drawn a cheque for twenty pounds, he cashed it, and rose to leave. The Manager, however, laid a hand upon his arm.

"My lord!" he said, earnestly. "Before you go, I hope you will let me venture a little bit of advice!"

"It will probably be quite useless, but I owe you a courtesy. Go on!"

"You know your condition?"

"Perfectly! I have been reassured regarding it this morning!"

"Then my advice is, communicate with your family without delay."

"It would be of no use. I have done with my own people for ever; or they have done with me. It does not matter a button which, does it?"

"Your mother —"

"My mother died when I was a boy. My father five months ago. My brother, who succeeds, would rather cut his throat than recognise me, and the rest of the family follow

his lead. Never mind, in three months I shall be quits even with myself. So what does it matter after all!"

"But it can't be so bad as that. Surely if they knew the state of your health they would relent?"

"Thank you, I have not the least desire for either their pity or their forgiveness. I humbled myself before them once, and was reviled for my pains. I have no intention of doing so again, I can assure you!"

"My lord, this is very, very sad!"

"You would think so if you knew all. Now, in my turn, let me give you a little bit of advice. If ever you are tempted to go wrong, put a bullet through your brain then and there. Don't wait to consider. You'll find it cheapest in the long run, believe me! Good-bye."

He shook the banker by the hand and passed out through the office into the glaring sunlight. Once there he looked up and down the road as if irresolute. Finally he made up his mind.

"I'll do it! By Jove, I will!"

Then he set off, as fast as his enfeebled limbs would permit, to find the woman whose destitution had so much affected him two hours before.

He called first at Jimmy Way Ling's store, but

she had not been there; he interrogated several people he met, but they had not seen her. She was not to be found anywhere along the beach, nor had the Kanakas encountered her upon the hill. After a while he began to look upon the quest as hopeless. So having rested on the sea front, he made one final search, and this proving unsuccessful, struggled up through the dust to his curious residence on the hill side.

CHAPTER II

THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY

"Sans les femmes les deux extrémités de la vie seroient sans secours, et le milieu sans plaisir."

THE sun, as if to show that his power did not terminate with his departure, arranged that the night should prove well-nigh as hot as the previous fourteen hours had been. The great full moon shone down upon the settlement as brilliantly as the sun had done all day. Her rays illumined everything; but while those of her lord found out and brought into relief the many imperfections of that worn-out spot, she, on the other hand, toned down such blemishes, and threw a halo of romance, and even a sort of weird beauty over the most commonplace and unsatisfactory things. Especially was this noticeable in her treatment of John Garfitt's tattered residence on the hill side. Viewed by her light, even the dingy Castor Oil Bushes growing beyond the verandah rails, the spiky leaves of the Aloe, the faded

tangle of a group of Palms, exhibited a certain picturesqueness that was not at all their portion in the other's scorching glare.

The house itself was a wooden structure in wretched repair; a lonely barrack of a place, that was only occupied by Garfitt because its remoteness from the Township promised a privacy that would not have been obtainable elsewhere. And certainly a less frequented abode he could not have discovered. From the time when it was first built, it had been a strangely unfortunate place; death after death had occurred in it, and more than one queer story circulated in the settlement concerning it. But Garfitt was not the sort of man to be scared by old wives' tales, and so here, quite alone, he dwelt, and here on this particular evening, he had gathered together the four men whom he had chosen to celebrate the news of his release with him.

They sat in the large room at the further end of the verandah. It was not a cheerful place at any time; but under the conditions to be hereafter enumerated, it was like a glimpse of the Refectory of the Castle of Despair. A dirty oil lamp, that flared and smelt abominably, hung from the ceiling, and revealed the poverty stricken nature of the apartment. The walls

were stained and mildewed; the moon could be plainly seen through the fracture in the roof; and the floor had not been swept within the memory of man. The chairs were boxes, the table only an empty packing case turned on end. On this last, numerous champagne bottles were grouped, while others, emptied of their contents, lay scattered about upon the floor.

Round this impromptu table sat four men, each embodying a distinct Thursday Island type. Because the night was hot they had discarded their coats, and for greater coolness had rolled their shirt sleeves as high as they would go. At the head of the board sat John Garfitt, the giver of the feast; on his right lolled San Francisco Dick, once famed far and wide as the smartest seaman in those smart seas; opposite him was The Scholar, who, a few years before, armed only with a belaying pin, had put down a mutiny aboard his topsail Schooner, the "Waterwitch," and sailed her into Cooktown, his head half tomahawked away; while beyond him again was The Man from New Guinea, whose handsome face, mysterious history, and wonderful diving feats were schooner gossip from the furthest Kuriles to the Friendly Group.

Like Garfitt, they were all victims of the same dread disease. Like Garfitt, from being hale and hearty men, they were fast dwindling into shadows, going swiftly towards that black darkness that seemed already to overshadow the very air they breathed.

It was easy to see that they had been drinking deeply, a wild, desperate carousal that had a sort of echo in the very circumstances of their lives. For they were all without hope, and in consequence were all reckless to the last degree. But though each man knew his fate, and before the world affected a grisly nonchalance concerning it, it was that very affectation that made him betray his real anxiety too plainly.

Throughout the evening Garfitt had been in the most uproarious spirits; his raillery of his companions, and his bitter witticisms against himself, had hardly ceased for a minute. He stopped at nothing. No subject was too sacred or too profane for him. Oblivious to the fact that they were his guests, he seized upon their superstitions one by one, held them up to ridicule, and dashed them down again. Every moment he grew more reckless, and every moment his wit became more and more caustic

and severe. It was impossible to check him. He laughed and sneered at everything—at life—at death—at love—at religion—at even the vaguest thought of a Hereafter. His extraordinary memory, unimpaired by the ravages of his disease, threshed through all the great philosophers for texts to illustrate his meaning. Indeed to such a pitch did he at length come, that his audience, who had at first laughed with him, now shrank from him in sheer terror and disgust. Seeing this he bade them go on drinking—drinking—drinking. That was his continual refrain. To drink—the only thing that could give them the least enjoyment before they were blotted off Life's Roll Call for ever. His thin face was flushed, and his eyes shone like enormous rubies. He rocked to and fro, and the more he talked, the more excited he became. Unknown to them he was working out a curious problem for himself. It was not possible for them to understand that he was fighting madly against the Sea of Despair that was fast threatening to engulf him. And, illogically enough, it was in thus outraging the feelings of others that he derived the only atom of consolation that was possible to him.

San Francisco Dick, on whom the wine had produced a maudlin effect, was at last so much upset by his host's eloquence, that he began to sob softly. The Man from New Guinea sat looking steadily before him into the moonlit verandah with a strange expression of perplexity upon his handsome face. Only The Scholar seemed to be really listening. Once or twice he raised his hand deprecatingly. At last, unable to bear it any longer, he rose to his feet, swayed for a moment till he got his balance, and then moved towards the door. As he did so he said solemnly, but without any sign of anger —

"You drunken dog. Since you can't stop that blasphemy, I'm going home!"

"Go then!" cried Garfitt mockingly, "go home — why should I bother myself with such a paltry cur? Bah! Go back to your kennel; and pray on your drunken, bended, cowardly knees for a few days' longer life. Pray to be allowed to live; with that colour in your cheeks, that blood upon your lips, and that trembling in your hands, mocking every word you utter. Go back and pray to be allowed to drag on in this hell, unable even to —"

He came to a sudden stop, and drew the back of his hand across his mouth. When he looked

at it the expression on his face changed like magic.

"Scholar," he cried, "come back!"

But there was no answer. The Scholar had left the house and was reeling and staggering down the broken path among the Castor Oil Bushes.

Then Garfitt's fury blazed out again. He turned upon his two remaining guests, who were watching him with fascinated faces, and cried —

"Get up, you skrimshanking beachcombers, and go too! Clear out of this—I'll have no more of you! [Then to San Francisco Dick] What are you blubbering about, you ninny? Bah! How sick I am of you! Get up and go! But no, stay a moment. Here's a song to take away with you—my own music, but the words of a man who knew all the sorrow and the travail of the world. No, I can't sing to-night!"

He paused, and then began to recite. It was not a nice performance, for his voice was little more than a whisper, and he had to stop at the end of every line for breath.

*"Lay your dear little hand on my heart, my fair.
Ah! you hear how it beats on its chamber there?"*



Garfitt had risen and was now leaning against the packing-case table.

*In there dwells a carpenter grim and vile,
And he's shaping a coffin for me the while!"*

Sacramento Dick could stand it no longer; he rose and fumbled his way along the wall to the window that opened on to the verandah. Once there, he turned and looked back at Garfitt, who had risen and was now leaning against the packing-case table. Then he too vanished from the house. Garfitt laughed and continued —

*"There is knocking and hammering night and day;
Long since they have frightened my sleep away.
O Carpenter, show that you know your trade,
That so to sleep I may soon be laid!"*

When he had finished there was absolute silence. Then he turned to his remaining companion, and pushing a bottle towards him bade him fill his glass, saying —

"That so to sleep we may soon be laid. Drink, you fool. I'll give you the toast of the evening. Death! Ourselves! And our —"

He paused and looked at The Man from New Guinea, who was cowering before him stopping his ears. There was something so pathetic about his posture, that without completing his sentence

he sank back into his seat, and closed his eyes. The room seemed to be swirling round him, and a pulse somewhere in the back of his head was beating like a piston rod. Then after what seemed an eternity, he felt a hand on his arm, and heard a voice, close to his ear, saying —

“You don’t mean it. I know you don’t! For God’s sake, for the sake of anything you hold dear, say you don’t!”

Garfitt tried to reply, but the words stuck in his throat. He would have given anything to have been able to laugh brutally, but somehow he could not manage it. The liquor from an overturned pannikin fell drop by drop, drip, drip, drip upon the floor. Then the same almost gentle voice began again.

“Garfitt, for your mother’s sake — surely you must have some reverence left for her — give me a word of comfort! My God! To think that I was once a gentleman — a public school boy — a Varsity man — and now to be dying out here, cut off from everybody like this! Oh Heavens! If I could make you see what I want! I know it’s all up with me. I’ve known that these four months, and I’ve fought it, who can tell how hard! Heaven knows I’ve tried to meet it like a man. But I can’t, I can’t! I’m afraid — so

cursedly afraid of what comes after. Can't you give me one word of comfort — just one word of hope — one little word of encouragement? I know you don't believe all the vile stuff you've talked to-night. I can read it in your face. Say something to me, you're so much cleverer than I am, and I'm so lonely, and so horribly afraid!"

There was another period of silence before Garfitt answered, during which the sound of the drops grew fainter and longer between. A great shiver swept over him. He drew his hand almost angrily out of the other's, and crossed to the open window. There he tried to collect his thoughts. He had never been placed in such a position before. In spite of all he had said that evening, he would have given anything to have been able to speak one word of comfort to this poor, trembling wretch, from a basis of firm conviction. But he could not do it. His tongue was tied.

"I can't," he muttered hoarsely. "I would do anything in the world to help you. But I can't say anything. What right have we to argue? It is the decree of Nature, that is all. We are the Balance of the System working out our destiny! Why do you seek to know more?

From nothing we came; isn't it logical to conclude that to nothing we shall return? If you want further consolation, see here —

*“Was ist der Tod? Nach einen Fieber,
Ein sanfter Schlaf, der uns erquicket!
Der Thor erschreckt darüber,
Der Weise ist entzückt.”*

“Isn't that enough for you? Get up, for pity's sake — don't let the Devil see that you're afraid — if you can't be a rational Being, be a man!”

The other rose and came slowly up the room.

“Good-night!”

“What, are you going too? Scared away like those other curs?”

“Let me go! I can't stay under the same roof with you. You choke me! I don't want to die. I can't—I won't! I'll not believe it's hopeless—there must be a cure if I can only find it. I will not give in. You have no right to make me think of such a thing!”

“What a weak-hearted chicken it is to be sure! Can't you see reason? If you go to Nothing, it's all over, and in that case, of what are you afraid? You're at least at rest, and surely that's something. If on the other hand,

you go to Something, and your teaching is all right, then your Future will be reckoned by your Past, and you'll get your just reward. You have no right to grumble if you suffer. You can't have your fun and not pay for it. The reasoning's plain enough, isn't it? You won't stay and argue it out? Then good-night!"

When his last guest had departed and he was left alone in the verandah, Garfitt stood for some time looking down upon the settlement and the moonlit harbour. He could see for miles, but the soft wind sighing among the Palms was all that he could hear. The artistic side of his nature drank in its beauty, and as he watched, the quiet and the picturesqueness of the night settled upon his soul like oil upon a troubled sea. But this peace was only the commencement of a great torture; for one train of thought led on to another, and then his memory rose up in its strength and carried him back across the waste of years to his early life. It paraded his Past before him with scrupulous exactness, and in order that his pain should be the more acute, went into the most minute and agonizing particulars. He saw his start in Life, his manifold advantages, he saw all that

had been so confidently expected of him, and he groaned for very shame when he realized how ignominiously he had failed. On went the record with relentless persecution, and one by one he noted the circumstances, insignificant in themselves, but oh, how deadly in their after-effect, that had lured him on the downward path to his last great shame and banishment. He lived again the first bitter humiliation of his downfall — the first experiences of that wild, free life as a member of this strange community. He reviewed his diving exploits, his trading trips among the islands of those lovely Southern Seas. His desperate carousals, his wild, free loves rose up before him with all their after-shame. Then, bit by bit, he saw his health begin to fail, and the agonizing conclusion force itself in upon him, that the hereditary fate of his family was claiming him for its victim. He saw his bitter fight against it, noted the fierce agony of the struggle, the recurring flickers of hope, and then the final misery that supervened. He recalled how, under the influence of his first despair, he had approached his family on the subject of forgiveness, and he writhed again when he remembered with what scorn and contumely his advances had

been received. And what was the nett result, he asked himself?

Why, that he was to die in this place — alone! That he was to disappear off the face of the earth like a homeless cur; to die cut off from kith and kin, an outcast and an outlaw; that he was to meet his end with the consolation of a vicious Past behind him, and the sure anticipation of either Punishment or complete Oblivion ahead. And when he actually came to die, how would it be with him then? Under what circumstances would the final scene take place? Would there be anyone to witness it? Anyone to soothe his last few moments, anyone to pity him for the physical agony he would endure, anyone to regret him, any single person who would feel that the world was not quite the same without him? “No!” he muttered viciously to himself, “not one! No, not one!” He was utterly, abjectly, horribly alone, without love, without respect, without even the sympathy of the higher order of friendship. His Present only Disgrace, and his Future always and eternally Despair.

As his mind dwelt upon this fact, an intense, an awful longing seized him to find someone — anyone — it would not matter whom — that could

be brought—even by bribery—to feel some small touch of kindness for him; someone who would stand by him when that ghastly end should come, to help him to comport himself like a man in that last fierce struggle. It surely could not be so very difficult; he was comparatively rich; could not his thousand pounds find that helper for him? Anyone—it would not matter who!

The house behind him was very dark and silent. The moonlight streaked the verandah floor, and shone upon the broad, coarse leaves of the shrubs beyond the rails. The fronds of the Palms rustled together softly on the roof, a little earth rolled down from somewhere on the hill side, and then he heard the noise of a green frog, in the empty room behind him, catching insects for its supper. He listened for it again, and that listening strained his already overstrung nerves almost to breaking pitch. One—[a pause] Two—[a pause] Three. Three deaths in less than a minute. He began to look upon those beetles and himself as being of the same inevitable destiny.

The moonlight crept further and further across the floor. The reek of the lamp came out of the room on a column of hot air. A ship's bell in the harbour struck five [half past

ten]. Should he go to bed? No! He was not in the least inclined for sleep, it would only mean that he would lie, hour after hour, tossing and tumbling to and fro, thinking of the death that was saving up for him, and cursing the cowardice that would not permit him to anticipate it.

Suddenly the sound of a footstep beyond the Aloe hedge broke upon his ear. He craned his head forward to listen. Yes, someone was certainly moving about down there. Who could it be at such an hour? Not a native, for he knew they would not venture near the place after nightfall; not one of his neighbours, for the house stood remote from any habitation. Perhaps it was one of his guests, lured back by the remembrance of the unfinished liquor. But, whoever it was, the steps were coming closer, and he moved his position to obtain a better view. Then a figure entered the moonlight and approached the house. It was a woman, utterly worn out. She came closer, and he recognised the outcast Frenchwoman whom he had already assisted, and for whom he had been searching earlier in the day.

She paused as if to pluck up courage. Then emboldened by the sight of the figure in the

verandah, she advanced towards the steps. Garfitt went forward to receive her.

"I saw the light," she began, as if in apology for her intrusion, "and I thought — you, Monsieur!"

This surprise coming on top of her weakness was almost too much for her; she tottered, and clutched at the verandah post for support. Garfitt divined the cause.

"Why didn't you go to Way Ling's as I told you? You are starving. Come in here. I haven't much in the eating line to offer you, but fortunately there is plenty to drink!"

He escorted her into the room, and pushed an empty box towards the table. She seated herself with a sigh of relief, and watched him with wolfish eyes as he hunted about for food to set before her. This found, he opened a fresh bottle of champagne and filled a panikin. The wine gave her new strength, and she attacked the food ravenously. Garfitt waited on her, and as he did so became more and more aware of her attractiveness. In spite of the undignified feeding of her hunger, there was something peculiarly graceful about her; he noticed also that her features were small and that her mouth was very piquant and pleasing.

Suddenly he was overpowered by a great idea. He remembered his thoughts before she came upon the scene. Here, he told himself, was the very person to his hand. Here was a woman palpably alone in the world! She was desperate, so was he! She had nobody to consider, nor had he! Fate had evidently sent her to him! Why should they not unite? He was comparatively rich, she was poor. What was to prevent him from purchasing her affection? He would be good to her, she would surely be grateful, and gratitude is often the beginning of love. Looking at her more closely, he told himself that it would certainly be worth his while to try.

When she had satisfied her hunger, she rose and expressed her gratitude. Her voice was very soft and all the prettier for the little note of sadness that ran through it.

"Monsieur," she said, "how can I say how much I thank you?"

"I beg you will not mention it," he answered, still looking at her. "Are you quite sure that you are satisfied? It is not much, but —"

He stopped. He was almost afraid to venture on what he had to say, lest his proposition might meet with a refusal.

"Let me give you some more wine!"

He poured out one glass for her and another for himself. He wanted all the courage he could raise. It seemed to him that the most important event of his whole life depended on her answer to the question he was about to put to her. He drank his wine and resumed the conversation.

"I would not appear impertinent, but may I know your name?"

"Céleste, Monsieur."

"Then, Céleste, don't you know that this Island is no place for a friendless woman?"

She gave her shoulders a little shrug.

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I could not help myself, Monsieur. Necessity brought me!"

"And now that you are here?"

"I must try and find some employment that will enable me to support myself until I can get home to France."

"What sort of work do you want? What can you do?"

"I am a good milliner. Perhaps the ladies of the Island —"

"There are not enough to give you a week's employment!"

"Then I can cook!"

"Here that is done by Chinamen and Japanese."

"I can wash and get up linen."

"You would not make the poorest living at it."

"There must surely then be other things?"

"Not for you! Pardon me, but you are too frail for any of these occupations!"

"Then what can I do? I cannot starve!"

"No, no, you shall not starve!"

"You will help me, Monsieur?"

"If you will help me. See here, Céleste. Look at me carefully. Am I in good health?"

"Monsieur does not look strong certainly, but—"

"There is no 'but' in this war, Céleste. I'm done for, lock, stock, and barrel; and all the king's horses and all the king's men will never make Garfitt a strong man again! I learnt my fate to-day. In three months, probably less, I shall be a dead man, put away in a hole up yonder—a denizen of the Land of Shadows. It's not a nice notion, is it? But it's no use playing make-believe with words. One must look facts straight in the face, or own oneself a coward. Now listen to me and don't speak till I've done."

His voice trembled a little.

"I have in the Bank down yonder something like — well, call it roughly a thousand pounds. A thousand pounds is a lot of money, isn't it? With a thousand pounds one might do a good deal, see the world, France, for instance. At most I shall not spend two hundred before I die! Now this is my proposition. You are alone. You lack funds. You want to get Home. Come to me—live with me—take care of me for that time, that is until I die; make my life as pleasant as possible to me while it lasts, and you shall have all that is left of that money to do as you like with—when I go hence. What do you say?"

She did not answer for a minute. For fully sixty seconds there was absolute silence between them. During that time he heard the frog in the next room jump thrice. What was Destiny going to do for him? He had noticed the eager look in her face when he mentioned the amount of his fortune, and he had also seen the faint shiver that passed over her at the remainder of the proposition.

"Come," he said, "is it to be yes or no? A thousand pounds—think of that, Céleste. In three months' time, perhaps less, to become

your absolute property. It is a question of poverty or wealth for you. Surely it should not be so very difficult to choose?"

"There is no choice for me, Monsieur, I *must* say yes."

Yes! Yes! She had said "yes." The crisis was past. He had won. He knelt beside her and took her hand. They were little, slim fingers, but they thrilled him to the marrow. It was an eternity since he had touched such a slender hand. There was a world of exultation in his face. What did anything matter now? He could fight Death on his own ground; for was there not someone in the world who took an interest in him? Poor little homeless drab though she was, she was his property, his very own. True, she was bought with his money. But what did that matter, she was all the more his. He gripped her hand tighter with the thought. It would go very hard with him if, having won her gratitude, he could not win her love.

He passed his arm round her waist and pulled her to him till he could bring her no closer. He could feel her heart beating violently against his side. Thus would he hold her and cherish her against the world. She was his,

and his only, or money had no power to bind. In a very agony of possession he kissed the pale cheeks, and each time she offered no resistance. Oh, it was good, very good to kiss again. It was like a new world, or an old one regained, to hold that trembling, palpitating form in his arms. Suddenly he caught the look in her eyes. With that he withdrew his arm and rose to his feet. Her face was very white, and she was trembling in every limb.

"I beg your pardon," he said huskily. "I was a brute. But I could not help it, I swear. It shall not happen again, upon my honour!"

He passed into the verandah, and as he crossed the threshold, he saw that he was not alone. A man was standing on the steps regarding him with a look of intense sadness upon his face. He recognised his friend, the young English Missionary.

"Garfitt," the latter said, "I have been watching your light for the last three hours, thinking of what you told me this morning. At last I could bear it no longer; I have come to plead with you! What does this mean? Who is this unhappy woman, and what is she

doing here? Are you dead to *all* sense of shame?"

This was exactly the opportunity Garfitt wanted. He turned upon the unfortunate Padre all the pent-up thunder of his wrath. The other ventured no reply. Only when he had finished, he said very sadly —

"Hush! hush! You need say no more. I see that it is useless to argue with you. I will leave you for the present. But I warn you — Heavens! Man! what is the matter?"

Garfitt was clinging to the verandah rail, his head tilted forward, and a torrent of blood pouring from his mouth, over his white shirt front, down into a black pool upon the verandah floor. Bit by bit he sank to the ground.

The woman heard the cry and rushed out. In an instant she had divined the meaning of it all. Then without a word she passed her arms under his shoulders, the Padre took his feet, and together they bore him to the pallet that he called his bed.

"Lay him down flat," she said.

He did so.

Then with marvellous quickness and the skill that is only born of experience she set to work to arrest the bleeding, the Padre

fulfilling her instructions with trembling eagerness.

When all that could be thought of had been done, he said in French —

“He must not be left here all alone. I will try to find someone to stay with him.”

“You need not do yourself so much trouble, Monsieur, I shall remain with him!”

Having looked into her face and discovered what he wanted, but did not expect to find there, the Padre, to his own surprise, found himself saying fervently, “God bless you!”

CHAPTER III

TEN DAYS LATER

Judges and senates have been bought for gold;
Esteem and Love were never to be sold.

— POPE.

It was fully ten days after that eventful night, just described, before the sick man could really be pronounced out of danger. And to his own surprise, during the whole of that period (so deep-rooted is the love of life in the human breast), even though the expression of his feelings was diametrically opposed to living, even though he had brought his affairs to this climax as a testimony of joy for his death sentence, Garfitt found himself afraid to move a finger, lest by so doing he should bring about the very thing he had hitherto professed himself most ardently to desire. Indeed it would have been extremely improbable that he would have recovered at all had he not had the advantage of Céleste's most wonderful nursing. Such care as

hers falls to the lot of but few patients. Her devotion surpassed description. Day and night she was by his side. She anticipated his every want, spared herself no labour to ensure his comfort, fed him, washed him, cooked for him, and in the intervals sat by his bed, sang and read to him, and cheered him in a thousand little ways that no other could have done.

Between times the dwelling received her attention. She had early appropriated what remained of the cheque he had cashed on the day of their first meeting, and with it she had wrought marvellous changes in the house. She seemed to have a knowledge of everything, and a wonderful capacity for utilizing the most insignificant trifles. Garfitt could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the alterations she was effecting in the room in which he lay. Not only was it now as clean as a new pin, but the roof had been mended, the walls and floor were repaired, sundry strange decorations were making their appearance, while under her busy fingers the furniture was taking to itself quaint and mysterious coverings of its own.

But it was in Céleste herself as much as in anything else that he noticed the change. Good living, an interest in life, and continued freedom

from personal anxiety were making a wonderful difference in her. Every day her figure seemed to be filling out, her face to be regaining its plumpness, and her eyes to be losing the expression of haggard despair that had once possessed them. She had purchased some soft, clinging, gray material, out of which her own deftness and Parisian taste had manufactured a dress that gave her a new and infinitely charming appearance. Garfitt noticed the white collar and cuffs with a sort of thrill. This was altogether an unexpected version of the affair, and one that sent a variety of unexpected thoughts surging through his brain. Again that query? Who was she? Her walk, her speech, her very gestures, evidenced the fact that she was no common woman. Garfitt began to grow nervous, for when she smoothed his pillow and looked at him with her dark brown eyes, and touched his flesh with those soft, bewitching fingers, a great wave of something that was very near akin to love swept over him and convulsed him to his core. What was this woman doing in Thursday Island? How did she come to be so lonely and so desolate? Was it Fate that had brought them together? And if so, what was the end of it all to be? These were

questions he continually asked himself. And they were equally questions that he could not answer. Céleste was an enigma, and he soon found that, while ostentatiously anxious to give him all her present, she was chary of permitting him even the faintest clue to her past.

As he watched her moving about the rooms or sitting by his side, he admitted that it was very good to be tended by such a woman. The money his father had left him would otherwise have proved of little value to him since he had lost the capacity for enjoying it. Now it had done him one good service at least, inasmuch as it permitted him the society of Céleste. But as he lay and thought it out, even this knowledge did not meet with his approval. Somehow he did not like to think that all this seeming love service was not love service at all, but a mere mercenary *quid pro quo*, an affection that had been purchased for money, and one which, when such money ceased, would come to a standstill also. This thought was continually in his mind, and each time it left him with a growing soreness against Céleste. It did not seem to him fit and proper that such a woman should possess so small a soul, and yet again, he argued, almost in despair, was she, after all,

so much to blame? What else could she do? She was in a strange place, penniless, and friendless; why should she not take advantage of the chance that Fate had given her? Anyone else would have done the same. And yet, as I have shown, however illogical it may seem, the very knowledge that she had benefited him by consenting to his proposition, caused him to bear a grudge against her of which he found it difficult, if not almost impossible, to rid himself.

Céleste sat in the verandah hemming some muslin for a window blind, and from his bed he watched her graceful manner of holding the needle. A ray of sunlight straggling through the bower of creepers just fell upon her head, and caught the bright brown of her hair. One little foot peeped from beneath her gray dress, and he noted its slender proportions. As she worked, she sang softly to herself. He recognised the song; that pathetic little poem of Heine's which somehow seems to echo half the sadness of the world.

*“Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam
Im Norden auf Kahler Höh:
Ihn schläfert; mit weisser Decke
Umhüllen ihn Eis und Schnee*

*Er träumt von einer Palme,
Die fern im morgenland
Einsam und schweigend trauert
Auf trennender Felsenwand."*

It was a singular coincidence that, when she finished, both gave little sighs. Had the song any significance for her? Who was the Palm, and who was the Pine? Could it be possible that there was another person in her life? But even if there were, what could it matter now? She was his property, bought and paid for with his money, and — but there the old bitterness cropped up again, and started him on the same eternal round of argument.

Her task completed, she rose and entered the room to put it up. He still watched, and a thrill went through him as he observed the faultless symmetry of her figure. The dark green of the Palm outside gave the window the property of a looking glass, and in it she saw that he was watching her. She turned and smiled at him over her shoulder, and for hours the recollection of that smile haunted him. What had he done to merit such torture? For so would she smile on anyone else as rich as he, and should another come with greater gifts, then, in all

probability, she would forsake him in favour of the new. "Never mind," he reflected with a little sigh, "no other man, with a thousand pounds, is likely to come within three months, and then I shall be where it will not matter."

Among Garfitt's few acquaintances who, during that fortnight, took the trouble to ascend the hill to find out whether he were alive or dead, was the Padre. He came at all hours, and Garfitt noticed that every time he came he stayed longer and talked less. His own abode was further round the Hill near the Jesuit's House, where for three years, more lonely than the most friendless, he had eked out a pitiful existence, fighting his fight, in his own fashion, against the multitudinous sorrows of the place. Since that strange night when he had first made Céleste's acquaintance, he had thought a great deal about her, and the more he had given his mind to the study of her character, the firmer some of his convictions had become. That she was not the woman he had at first imagined her was certain. He felt that he had done her an injustice, and the knowledge of this fact led him on to study her more closely, in order, perhaps, that he might discover exactly what description of woman she

really was. By the time he arrived at a conclusion he was in lamentable case! After that he was convinced that he ought not to go near the house at all, and yet, with the same candour, he had to admit that he could not remain away. For this reason, when Céleste saw him toiling up the path, and came into the verandah to greet him, a slender, gray figure among the dark green creepers, he trembled like the veriest coward, and began to say bitter things to himself, and to wish that he had never been born. Then after the visit he would return to his lonely little abode, and enter upon a rigorous self-examination, the deduced results of which would have been invaluable, could they have been put on paper for the benefit of others similarly afflicted.

But the Padre, though the most constant, was not the only visitor. Since Garfitt had been ill, or rather since Céleste had been nursing him, there were others whose visits to the house were more frequent than they had been wont to be aforetime. Among these considerate friends might have been reckoned Gentleman Jim, the owner of the lugger "South Sea Prince," whose handsome face and winning manners made him as popular with The Sex as his dashing courage and reckless seamanship

caused him to be with men. Though he knew he held the Bank, Garfitt was not at all easy in his mind when he saw him so often with Céleste.

One morning, Gentleman Jim climbed the Hill earlier than usual. Céleste was sewing in the verandah, but before conversing with her the visitor had, for appearances' sake, to fulfil the ostensible object of his call, and visit her employer in the room within. When he considered he had done the polite thing there, he returned to the verandah and began a whispered conversation with Céleste.

Garfitt, who saw through his manoeuvre, lay and burned with rage. Was this woman whom he had bought with an agony more expensive than any money, to be stolen from him by this reckless freebooter? Not if he could prevent it! He heard her laugh, and he resolved at any risk to go out and protect his own interests.

But he was spared the exertion and the danger, for just as he was about to put his resolve into execution, Céleste and her admirer entered the room. She passed through it into the interior of the house; Gentleman Jim advanced towards the bed, and Garfitt noticed that his face was preternaturally solemn.

"Garfitt," he said, "I've come to say good-bye. I'm off this afternoon."

"You said just now you would not sail for a week?"

"That was just now. I'm years older since then!"

"I believe I understand!"

"Well? Nothing more to say?"

"Only that if I were strong enough I'd wring your neck like a partridge's!"

"Sorry for your sake, you can't, of course! But all the same I don't quite grasp the situation!"

"Don't you? Well, don't force me to explain, that's all! I'm pretty near done for, but if any of you fellows play me false, I promise you I'll find strength enough to kill somebody before I die!"

"That's the talk! There's a kick in the old horse yet! Well, my lad, I won't poach. I've received my facer, and I'll go this afternoon. You mustn't think too hardly of me, I didn't know what sort of a man I was till I looked into that woman's eyes. Good-bye. You won't shake hands? Well, perhaps you're right. It was a pretty shabby trick after all!"

He passed out of the house and down the path among the bushes. As he disappeared

Céleste entered the room. It was time for his midday meal, and she brought it to him, helping him to sit up to it like a little child. When he had finished she smoothed his pillows, tidied his bed, and turned to leave him, saying laughingly as she did so —

“Ah! mon ami, I cannot think what you would do without your poor Céleste!”

With the remembrance of Gentleman Jim's last speech, and that laugh in the verandah, still ringing in his ears, he whispered brutally —

“It is fortunate that my money still holds out, or it strikes me I should not retain the services of even my poor Céleste for long!”

Her eyes flooded with tears, and without another word she left the room. Garfitt turned his face to the wall, muttering viciously —

*“Quand on a tout perdu, quand on n'a plus
d'espoir,
La vie est une opprobre, et la mort un devoir!”*

And, all things considered, perhaps the bitterness was excusable!

CHAPTER IV

THE FOURTEENTH DAY.

"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear." — ST. JOHN.

FOR some days after he was permitted to leave his bed, Garfitt was incapable of the least exertion. At the best of times a thin man, he was now a shadow of even his former meagre self. His weakness was indeed appalling. It was a matter of immense trouble to him to cross the room, while to reach the couch Céleste had constructed for him in the verandah, was a journey that left him powerless and speechless for minutes afterwards. Not, indeed, that he had betrayed very much desire for conversation at all of late. Since Gentleman Jim's last visit he had grown strangely silent, and this peculiarity seemed, in great measure, to have extended to the woman, his companion.

But though she was less talkative than of old, it must not be imagined that Céleste was in any

way less regardful of the wants of the man with whom she had thrown in her lot. If possible, she was even more assiduous in her attentions to him than before. His well-being lacked nothing ; everything that her administrative ability could devise for his comfort was done. She had obtained an additional sum of money from him, and with it she had still further beautified the house. The boxes and stools had, long since, given place to real furniture. Matting covered the once grimy boards ; light, airy curtains graced the windows ; bright pictures and home-like knick-knacks relieved the walls ; while, such was her popularity, all her admirers, and by this time they were not a few, had presented her with strange curios from the distant islands whither their luggers had aforetimes carried them. But though she accepted their gifts, she gave them only friendliness in return. At least she was true to her side of the bargain, and Garfitt was her one and only thought.

Noticing this, his heart smote him again and again for the coarseness of the speech he had made to her. He was compelled to admit that her care of him exceeded all that could have been secured for money ; and for this reason, when he saw the changes wrought in his rooms, once so dirty

and mean, noticed the home-like air that was creeping over everything, found himself clad as had once been his habit, tasted her dainty cookery, [which was a marvel and a source of supreme envy to those who ate with him] he began to experience an agonizing dread lest, like Aladdin's Palace, it should suddenly disappear, and leave him more desperately stranded than before. Three months, he took care to tell himself repeatedly, would see the end of it all; but with this comfort round him, and in that word "comfort" I include Céleste, he found the feeling stealing over him that he would be almost sorry when the end did come. It was long before he would allow himself to think this, much less to argue it. But in spite of his endeavours, it forced itself in, with the result that it left him more miserable than he thought he had ever been before. Oh! Why had he been so anxious to bring this new and disturbing influence into his life? Why had he not been satisfied to continue the same headlong, desperate course he had been pursuing? So that when the end should arrive, the end that had been so anxiously looked forward to, he might have been able to meet it without a pang. Now he was saddled with an intolerable anxiety, lest when

he went out of the world, this woman who had grown to be so much part and parcel of his life, should come to harm, lest she might lose her heart to one of his boon companions, one of those mysterious free-lances who always found sufficient leisure, between their cruises, to climb the hill and idle away their days in his verandah. He was quite alive to what they thought of Céleste. He had noticed the look in their faces when their eyes fell upon her, and he had seen the desire that held them when they realized his pretty rooms, and all the little appointments of that sweet housekeeping.

One hot morning, just a month after the coming of Céleste, Garfitt lay in the inner room. He was waiting for the sun to go over the roof before venturing into the verandah. The Padre called to see him. He noticed that he looked haggard and worn, and that his eyes wandered continually towards the door, as if he were expecting someone else to enter.

"Garfitt," he said at length, "you have not heard the sad news?"

"What news?"

"About San Francisco Dick?"

"Not a word. What's happened to him? Pegged out?"

"Drowned. He came to me in a terrible state last night for comfort — left me about ten o'clock — went straight down to the jetty and threw himself over. His body was washed up by the tide this morning."

"Poor devil! That's one of the four! I wonder who will be the next!"

"Oh, by the way, The Man from New Guinea bade me wish you good-bye for him."

"What, has he gone too?"

"He sailed in the 'Oodnadatta' for the Solomons yesterday. It is a great risk, for I'm afraid, poor fellow, he'll hardly reach them alive!"

"You call him 'poor fellow.' I call him a lucky dog. Oh! my life in Egypt! if I could only have one cruise again!"

As his lips formed the sentence his brain, with photographic distinctness, pictured for him a complete scene. He saw a schooner careering across curling seas, blue sky overhead, green water, foam crested, round about, a wealth of canvas straining from the spars, and a galaxy of fairylike islands peering up to port and starboard. This scene passed with lightning swiftness and another took its place. He saw the same schooner anchored in a still lagoon; on

one hand the surf was thundering on the reef, on the other the dim outline of the island showed up, with the village lights gleaming through the Palm Trees. The lip-lap of the water against the boat's counter, and the voices of some half-forgotten shipmates crowded on his ear. Then this picture also vanished, and he came back to the grim reality of the present.

"But, my dear fellow," he said, "you didn't come up here through the dust and heat to tell me this. You've something else on your mind! What is it?"

"I fear you will not be best pleased when you learn. I'm trying to summon up courage enough to tackle you!"

"What if I can tell you? My friend, your face has betrayed you long since. Padre, you're in love! Steady — don't deny it!"

The Padre turned a ghostly white, and caught with a long thin hand at the arm of his chair.

"Garfitt, there is no need at all to bring me into the business. I've come up here to do my duty, and at whatever cost to myself I must do it. Be a man and let me say what I have to say straightforwardly."

"Well?"

"It is about Céleste."

"I know — go on!"

"She — she is not your wife?"

"No!"

"She is living with you here, in this house?"

"Yes."

"You know that the settlement will put an uncharitable construction on your intimacy?"

"Very likely — but as I've never considered the settlement before, I fail to see that I need do so now! What does it matter?"

"Not much to you, perhaps, but to her!"

"I must decline to be ruled by what the settlement thinks!"

"Is that quite fair?"

"If it is a mutual bargain between man and woman, yes!"

"If not?"

"No!"

The Padre's voice trembled as his lips formed the question he had hitherto been religiously burking.

"Is this a mutual agreement between you then?"

Garfitt paused for a moment. He was quite aware what immense importance his answer

would be to the other. He smoothed the cover of the book he held in his hand, and looked contemplatively out of the window at the Harbour. A British India Mail-boat was steaming to her anchorage. She had just saluted the Residency Flag with a gun, and the white smoke was now floating down the Bay, thinning out as it went. Then he made up his mind and said quietly —

“Yes!”

The Padre rose, slowly as an old man. He turned to go, and as he did so he said huskily —

“Thank you for treating my impertinence with so much forbearance. I can’t quite argue it as I want to now. May I see you again on this matter?”

As if in answer to the question, Garfitt rose and placed a hand upon his arm.

“Padre, you’re a brave man, and I’m not fit to look you in the face! I told you the truth, and yet I told you a lie. For the moment I forgot that I had once been a gentleman. I beg your pardon. When I said that it was a mutual agreement that we should live together, it was the truth — but when I inferred her impurity, it was a lie. She is as good and true a woman as

the first day she came under my roof, so help me God !”

The Padre extended his hand without a word. Garfitt took it.

“ Let her go, Garfitt ! ”

“ What ? ”

“ Let her go ! Be brave — let her go ! ”

“ Let — her — go ! Man ! You don't know what you're asking of me ! I can't ! I can't ! it's impossible ! ”

“ You respect her, Garfitt ? ”

“ With my whole heart and soul ! ”

“ Then let her go. Think what it means to her living here with you ! ”

“ If neither of us minds what can it matter ? ”

“ That is not the way to look at it. You must think of her ! ”

“ I can't ! I can't ! How can you ask such a sacrifice of me as to give her up ? ”

“ But you tell me you respect her ? ”

“ God knows I do ! ”

“ Then is it your desire that no one else should ? ”

“ How dare you put it to me like that ! My friend, I think if I were a strong man I'd kill you for it ! ”

"You would not put yourself any more in the right by doing so."

"You do not know what she is to me. I tell you she is the only being that reconciles me to go on living. I shall be dead in three months or less. I am getting weaker and weaker every day. Can't you see that?"

"The more reason that you should not go down to your grave with this injustice upon your soul. Make a fight against it—let her go! We will find money enough amongst us to pay her passage home, and you shall be no loser as far as nursing goes, I pledge my honour!"

"No! No! I can't! Why should I? It does not matter to you. It's all very well for you to talk, you are not the loser. But I? Good Heavens! Look at me. Look around you. Look at this room. It's a home, a real home, and it is all her work. It's the first time in my life I've ever been made to feel that I am really cared for!"

"And you would repay it with injustice?"

Garfitt sank back on to his couch. He looked more dead than alive.

"It's all very well for you, Padre—it will not matter to you. You do not lose anything if she goes."

The Padre's face was a study. Garfitt saw it and stopped. "Ah! I forgot you love her!" he said bitterly.

"Garfitt, that is ungenerous. Whatever my feelings towards her may be, I have never given utterance to them nor allowed her to suspect. And at least I am giving her up. Won't you meet me half way? Come, say yes!"

There was a long pause, and both men looked in different directions.

"Will it do if I give her her choice to go or stay?"

"Will you pledge yourself to put it fairly before her?"

"I will! I give you the word of a man who was once a gentleman that I will even try and induce her to leave me. There's my hand upon it! Will you trust me?"

"I will, and may God bless you!"

"If He has any sense of justice, He will. For He will know how much it costs me to do it!"

"It will be made up to you."

"I don't want a sermon, thank you! Good day!"

The Padre bade him "good day" and went off down the path. Garfitt let his book lie

where it had dropped. All that was worth having in the world for him seemed to have suddenly gone out of it. He had committed himself by a solemn promise to break his one remaining link with happiness, and he would not draw back. Céleste, at any cost to himself, should have her choice to go or stay. For his own part he had not the slightest doubt as to what her choice would be. Of course she would jump at any opportunity of returning to her beloved France. What was there in Thursday Island to make her wish to stay? Necessity alone kept her there. It was just his luck. For the past few days he had almost regretted that he had so short a time to live. Now, if she was to be taken from him, the sooner the end came the better he would be pleased. He looked round the room so tasteful and comfortable, and remembered what it had been before her coming, and for the moment a great temptation came over him to break his promise to the Padre, and to keep her with him. No one would ever find out. Céleste would never hear of the promise that had been extorted from him, while the Padre would believe he had kept his word, and that she had elected to

stay. Surely the end would justify the means? He would make it up to her by a thousand kindnesses. But — but — he had promised. Had he fallen so low that he could not keep his plighted word? No! No! His better nature had triumphed, and he resolved to adhere to his bargain, whatever the result might be.

As he confirmed himself in his resolution, the door opened and Céleste entered the room. From the crown of her head to the sole of her foot she was all grace. Now that there was every probability of his losing her, Garfitt realized this more fully than he had ever done before. She picked up his book and wheeled a chair to his side.

"I'm afraid you've been exciting yourself again," she said, noticing the flush upon his face.

"I have had some bad news, Céleste!"

A frightened look swept over her face like a cloud across an April sky, but it was gone again in an instant.

"I am so very sorry. Tell me about it and let me sympathise!"

She laid her cool, plump hand on his hot and feverish forehead with a little touch of sympathy. He looked up into her face, and their eyes met.

What beautiful eyes she had, and how sweet that countenance had grown to him! Was it really possible that this could be the same woman he had first seen crying behind the Aloe Bushes on that staring, white road, near the cemetery, a month ago? It was hard to believe it!

"Give me a pen and ink, my girl!"

When she had brought them he drew his cheque book from his pocket and filled in a form. This done he took her hand again. She saw that something very serious was coming.

"Céleste, I've something terrible to say to you."

"Why, what can it be?" she cried in alarm.

"Something that is very unpleasant for me. Let me recapitulate. A month ago we met for the first time. You were poor and homeless. I was dying and, as far as wealth in this place goes, rich. I asked you to live with me and to take care of me until the end came."

"And have I not done it?"

"You have—only too well! I have never been cared for like it in my life before. But I have since been thinking that I had no right to ask it. You know the construction

the uncharitable would put upon our living here together? When I asked you to do it I thought it would not matter. Now I find that I respect you too much to allow you to lay yourself open to such a charge. I am more than grateful to you, but it cannot go on."

Céleste gazed at him in blankest amazement.

"Not go on? You mean that I must leave you?"

"Yes! But do not be afraid, you shall not stay in the Island. I will provide for your future. See, here is a cheque for £500, half my fortune. Take it to the Bank, cash it, and go back to France by the next steamer."

She drew herself up to her full height and her face flushed hotly. She pushed the cheque back into his hand, stood for a moment looking down on him, and then fell into a seat, and burying her face in her hands, sobbed as if her heart would break.

He let her cry for a minute, uncertain how to act, then he raised himself and bent over her, placing one arm round her shoulder in a caressing fashion. He was at a loss to understand what her tears might mean. But at any rate they banished once and for all any thought that she was mercenarily inclined.

"Won't you accept my present, Céleste?"

"No, no, ten thousand times no!"

"But, my dear, you must have money."

"I will not take yours! I did not nurse you for the money."

"But you cannot go without it!"

"It is cruel of you to think so badly of me! If I had thought you capable of it, I would not have stayed an hour with you!"

"I—think badly of you, Céleste? I, who reverence you more than all the world!"

"You cannot care for me very much or you would not send me away from you, out into the cruel world again!"

"It is only because I wish no harm to come to you that I ask you to go!"

"No harm could ever come to me from you. I will not go!"

"You will not go? And why not? No, no, do not answer! Look into my face! Céleste, I understand. I see it all. Oh! how blind I have been! My God, what have I done to deserve this mercy? What have I done? You love me, and you will stay?"

She still kept her face averted, but he found and took her hand. The whole universe resounded with songs of joy. What could hap-

pen now? He was safe — safe — safe ! Nothing could ever take her from him. For she loved him ! He found his voice at last —

“Céleste, how can I ask you? Will you be my wife? It is not much life and less of honour that I have to offer you, but if you'll take it, darling, all there is is yours.”

He was too exhausted to say more. His head fell back on to his pillows. The tears were quite gone from Céleste's face now, only a supreme happiness was written there. She bent her head and kissed his wasted hand.

CHAPTER V

THE SAME DAY

"This man and this woman." — *Marriage Service.*

It was some time before either spoke. Then Céleste said very softly —

"John!"

"My own Céleste!"

She began to rub her gentle hand up and down the back of his lanky fist. There was witchery in her touch. For with every pressure of those slender fingers a new phase of his happiness took possession of his soul.

"You are not angry with me?"

"Angry? My gracious Céleste, you don't know what you're saying! How could I be angry when I'm looking into Heaven! I am only swallowed up in a sea of happiness, that is all!"

"Ah! we two together in all the world!"

"Yes — we two! That's all! How well you seem to understand! Just we two out of

all the ages. Give me back your hand. I must hold it tight, or you may go away from me again, back into the Heaven whence you came."

"Are you sure it is Heaven?"

"Hardly! It is more probably Hell that allows a man a glimpse of Paradise when he knows he's hopelessly barred out of it. That's what The Cultivated call the Irony of Fate."

For a while they sat looking into each other's eyes. Now that Garfitt knew the real state of Céleste's feelings towards himself, he was like a man under the influence of a great amazement. It cost him an effort to believe that with so little trouble to himself he had won the affection of this radiant creature kneeling by his side. It was difficult for him to realize that she was now completely his property, not bound to him by any monetary link, not fettered by any gratitude, but by reason of her love for him, his very own. Therefore, lest she might suddenly disappear and be no more seen by him, he clung to her hand as if by holding that he might keep her always by his side. His anxiety was over and, as far as her leaving him was concerned, he knew his fate. She loved him. Oh, the wonderful, the blessed security of that know-

ledge! Happen what might, she would be true to him, he might count upon the continuance of her care up to the very bitterest end, and when the time should come for him to go, at least there would now be somebody who would always entertain some kindly recollection of him. Death, under such circumstances, could not surely be so very terrible.

And on his side what? Why, at any cost, he must cherish this new-found love in the short time left to him. He must be the very best husband to her any living woman could desire; he must constitute himself her abject slave if need be; nothing must be wanting on his part to promote her happiness: that by so doing he might weld stronger the link that bound them to each other. But there was one thing he repeatedly urged upon himself, something he had often said before, but which he now reiterated with tenfold earnestness. *On no account must he allow himself to love her beyond a certain limit.* For so surely as he did would he find the last struggle hard to make, and so surely would he be undoing all the fortitude he had built up for himself with so much bitterness and self-humiliation. He allowed Céleste to draw her hand out of his, and then he rose.

"Little woman, I must be off to see the Padre!"

"The Padre?"

"Why, about our marriage, to be sure. You don't suppose, having once got you, I'm going to let you slip? At any cost we must be married at once."

She turned her head away, but not before he had noticed that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Why, how now — what's this? Why those tears?"

She did not answer but fled into the house. He thought he understood. At any rate he did not follow her, but donning his hat, went down the path through the dust and heat towards the Township. As he walked he thought of many things. Some were pleasant, others were not, but over all was the glorious certainty that Céleste loved him, and that he was no longer quite alone in the world. As he passed the Aloe clump where he had first met her, he stopped and looked at it with a dim sort of curiosity. What a change had come over his life since that eventful morning! And once more he asked himself what power it was that had sent this woman into his life. Was she sent to him

for good or evil? For consolation or bitter mockery? It was too abstruse a problem to answer off hand, so he shook his head and continued his journey towards the Padre's curious residence, without arriving at any decision.

He found the Missionary in the apartment which served as Church and sitting-room combined. He held a shoe in one hand, a pipe-clay-rag in the other. It was one of his few remaining fads to be scrupulously neat in his appearance — a habit of his Harrow and University days of which he could not have rid himself even had he wanted to. He looked up as Garfitt opened the door, and his face testified to his surprise.

"Garfitt, my good fellow," he said, hastening forward, "I did not expect this; what are you doing out on such a day? You should really be more careful!"

"To what end? When we know the end of our tether, what need is there of care? But I have some news for you, Padre!"

The other put down the shoe and the pipe-clay-rag, and pointed to a chair. Garfitt seated himself.

"About Céleste?"

"About Céleste. Padre, I have carried out

my promise to you. Directly you went I gave her the chance of leaving me, and to make it worth her while, I backed it with a cheque for £500! Was that right?"

"God will reward you!"

"I hope so!"

"You will never regret it!"

"I don't believe I ever shall!"

"Well, and where is she now and when will she go?"

"Steady, old man! You're not very complimentary to me. I don't know that she will go at all!"

"Not go? What do you mean?"

"Why, what I say — that she won't go. We left one important factor out of our calculations. In other words, I've found out something — And — well, the long and short of it is, Padre, I want you to do me a favour!"

"What is it?"

"I want you to marry us to-day!"

There was a pause.

"Garfitt, do you honestly mean this?"

"Honestly, I do!"

"And she loves you?"

"She says she does, and I believe her!"

"Then God's blessing on you both, I say."

You could not have told me news that would have pleased me more."

He rose and shook hands with Garfitt very seriously.

"Padre, you're a white man, 'pon my soul you are! You take it like a brick. And you'll marry us? When?"

"When you please!"

"This afternoon? Say four — here?"

"Say four — here!"

"And you'll sup with us afterwards?"

"I'm afraid not — I —"

"You'd rather be excused. I understand exactly."

"Stay, on second thoughts, I think I *will* come. Where are you going now?"

"To the Bank! I must make my will. I'm a family man now, and there's no time to lose, you see!"

So saying he rose, bade the Padre farewell, and went on slowly down the dusty road to the Bank, which he had last visited under such very different circumstances.

When the Padre had watched him turn the corner he went back into the room and knelt down to offer up the most curious and involved supplication he had ever in his life given utter-

ance to. Then, being a man of moods, he quietly returned to the work of pipeclaying his shoe. From one of the Kanaka Billiard Saloons farther down the hill the voice of a man singing came up to him. He could hear the words plainly. Somehow there was a peculiar irony in the run of the old sea chanty that he had never noticed before.

*"And if you'd know this maiden's name,
Mark well what I do say!
And if you'd know this maiden's name,
Why, soon like mine 'twill be the same;
I'll go no more a roaming from you, fair maid.
A-roving, a-roving, since roving's been my ruin,
I'll go no more a-roving from you, fair maid."*

Meanwhile Garfitt had arrived at the Bank, and was closeted with the Manager. The latter was struck with the extraordinary and unaccustomed care of his appearance, the pipeclaying of his shoes, and the whiteness of his linen; and as he noticed these things, he marvelled. He was still more astonished when Garfitt said:

"Blake, you ought to congratulate me, this is my wedding day!"

"Your what?"

"My wedding day. I'm going to be married

this afternoon, and I've struggled down here to ask you to give my bride away, and also to come up and sup with us to-night."

"You are marrying Céleste?"

"I am marrying Céleste."

"I congratulate you most heartily. And if you will allow me to say so, I think you have done very wisely, my lord!"

"Drop that! I don't want to be called by that now. Yes, Blake, I'm going to make myself the happiest of men to-day — for — for — well for two months or thereabouts. It's rather a grisly idea, isn't it?"

"And can I do anything else to help you?"

"Yes! I want to make my will. You can help me to do that, I know. I want to settle everything on my wife."

"I understand. Sit down, and we'll draw it up."

The Manager drafted the will.

"There, I think that will do. Now who will you appoint your executor?"

"I should like to ask you to act as such."

"I shall be very glad to serve you."

He wrote again, and presently Garfitt signed the document in the presence of the two clerks mentioned elsewhere. Then he rose to go.

"There, that is settled. You're sure it is sound?"

"Quite. You need have no fear on that score."

"I am obliged to you. And you will be at the Padre's house at four, and afterwards sup with us?"

"I shall be delighted. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

When Garfitt got back to his home he found Céleste in the verandah. She had quite recovered her spirits, and greeted him with her usual bright face. But she was concerned to see how much his walk had fatigued him.

He sank into a chair and for some minutes gasped for breath. Her eyes were filled with great trouble as she noticed this.

"Dear love, you must never do so much again. You are quite worn out."

He could not answer, but he looked at her with a peculiar sort of tenderness that was more expressive than any words. When he had recovered a little he said:

"I have arranged everything. The Padre will marry us at four o'clock, and I have made my will, so that in less than three months you will inherit everything."

"Oh, no, no! I will not let you talk of that!"

"But, my dear, we must both look that fact steadily in the face. We begin our married life with that inevitable moment before us. In two or three months' time, as far as I am concerned, it will all end!"

"It must not. It shall not! There must be a cure, if we can only find it!"

It was The Man from New Guinea's cry — "there must be a cure if I can only find it." It struck him in a new light and on a very tender place now. But whatever she might say, he knew that he must not let himself be led into any desire for a respite. He was doomed to death; for two more months he would make himself happy with the woman who loved him, then with only a hope for rest, he would lie down in his place and be beyond the reach of pain and heartache for ever. He was not going to believe in a cure, to trust to it, and then find it turn out hopeless after all! No! Not he! At least he was not such a fool as that!

"You are not any weaker," Céleste continued. "You have had no return of the hemorrhage. Your cough is not so troublesome. I will nurse you as woman never nursed

man before. You must obey me in everything, we will try every remedy that money can buy, and then my love and care will surely pull you through!"

Her speech was agony to him. What could he do? What could he say? With her arms around him, and her sweet face looking into his, how could he shut his ears, and not only his ears but his understanding, to such temptation? No — no — no — at any risk he must not heed her!

"For mercy's sake do not tempt me! I cannot bear it! I have schooled myself to meet my death. I have taught myself, with you don't know what bitterness, to look forward to it. I have brought my mind to face it calmly. Look at my face, look at my hands. No care can save me; for pity's sake do not make a coward of me!"

Tears streamed down her face. He crossed to the other end of the verandah and tried to compose himself. When he returned he had mastered his emotion, and was able to say calmly —

"Céleste, we must never talk of this again. It is best not, believe me. Let us make the most of our time together, remembering always what a short time it is. But we must never dream of a reprieve. So shall we both be

prepared for the moment of separation when it comes. Now we must make our arrangements for this afternoon; and by the way, I have invited the Padre and Blake, whom I have appointed executor of my will, to take supper with us afterwards. You do not mind?"

They went into the house together, but though she tried to appear happy, a heaviness was upon her heart that looked as if it would never leave her again.

* * * * *

The sun was fast declining behind Fortification Hill when Garfitt and Céleste descended the path together and approached the Padre's House. He met them on the threshold. The Banker was in waiting, and to him fell the duty of giving the bride away.

Then, before the tiny altar, the glorious sunset streaming in upon them, John Garfitt took Céleste to be his wedded wife, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until his life's end. The ring was given and the blessing pronounced. They were husband and wife as surely as Mother Church could bind them.

The service over, they reminded the two men of their promise to sup with them, and returned quietly to their own home.

By the time they reached it the sun had disappeared behind the hill. A solemn stillness covered all the earth; the sea was as smooth as glass; the smoke lay wreathed about the tiny settlement; and the islands loomed wondrous large across the stretch of water. Céleste and her husband stood in the verandah and looked at these things. A great peace was upon Garfitt's soul; he felt happier than he had ever done since his banishment. Céleste noticed the look, and pressed the hand she held in hers. Then they turned to go in, and as they approached the door Garfitt took his wife in his arms and kissed her forehead.

"My good angel," he said softly, "my wife!"

She looked up at him with her beautiful eyes.

"Is it really true? Oh! John, I am not worthy to be your wife!"

"Hush!" he answered. "You must never say that. You little know what my life has been!"

Then he went away to rest himself, and she to the preparation of their wedding feast.

When Blake and the Padre reached the house that evening the moon was just rising over the extremity of Horne Island. They found the supper table laid in the verandah, and a

pretty picture it made. The white cloth, bright silver, and coloured candle shades, backed by the graceful Palm fronds, had a charming effect, and one that was very novel to men so long enured to the sordid commonplaces of the island. Even to their host, accustomed though he was by this time to the many little prettinesses Céleste devised for him, it was like a glimpse, and a happy glimpse, of a lost world. This was observable in his courteous reception of his guests, which was so much at variance with his old manner that Blake noticed it, and possessing a kindly nature, heaved a sigh for the sake of all the opportunities this man had wasted. He was almost sorry that he'd ever been made aware of the other's past history.

They sat down to supper — such a meal as two of them would remember for years to come. All the daintiest devices of French cookery seemed known to Céleste, and on this occasion she had employed them for their delectation. The host sat at one end of the board, his wife at the other, their guests on either hand. Garfitt was in excellent spirits, and his conversation had a brilliant sparkle in it which the others had neither known nor even suspected he possessed. And Céleste, who seemed lately to have blos-

somed out in a hundred new ways, ably seconded his efforts. When the meal was over, coffee and cigarettes made their appearance, and so they sat and chatted on, long after the moon had passed from their ken over the roof-top, and the lights had disappeared in the Township below.

The Padre, whose eyes never wandered far from where Céleste now sat next to Garfitt in the shadow of the wall, could not help contrasting their present position with the night when, harassed by the light that shone from this self-same verandah, he had struggled up and found the man and woman together for the first time. It was only a month ago, yet what an eternity it seemed! What a wonderful transformation had since been wrought!

As for Blake, he was in a new world; he had known Garfitt for some time, but had never looked upon him in any light save as one of the ordinary beachcombers of the Island, saddled with a hopeless disease. To see him as he was now, decently clad, surrounded by every luxury, the possessor of a beautiful and sympathetic wife, proving himself a brilliant conversationalist, a keen wit, and a more than intelligent observer, was a thing which cost him some effort to believe. What could such a man have done to

deserve such banishment? And what was the history of this accomplished woman who had appeared so mysteriously amongst them? He was not by any means an inquisitive man, but he felt he would have given something to have had these two questions satisfactorily answered.

As a ship's bell in the harbour struck eleven, the Padre and Blake rose to leave. When he had said good-night and descended the steps, the former bared his head, and raising his hand said solemnly —

“God's blessing rest upon this house!”

To which Blake, with equal solemnity, replied, “Amen!”

Their guests departed, Garfitt and Céleste remained in the verandah. A little wind came up to them from the sea, and rustled among the creepers. In spite of the happiness of the moment, there was a touch of sadness in it. Garfitt shivered slightly, and Céleste noticed it.

“You are cold, beloved! We had better go inside!”

“No, not for worlds,” he answered. “Let us stay here. I do not feel it. Somebody was walking over my grave, that was all!”

He spoke without thinking, never dreaming the effect his words would have upon his wife.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried. "Why are you so cruel to me? How can you say such awful things to-night?"

For some moments she sobbed hysterically. Her strength, overwrought by the excitements of the day, had given way completely under this little additional strain. Garfitt caressed and soothed her, saying—

"Forgive me, Sweet—I ought not to have said it, nor would I have done so had I thought. You know I would not give you pain for anything."

But though she tried to look cheerful it was a long time before her spirits returned to her.

Suddenly an intense desire to know something of his wife's past history took possession of him; he had never felt any wish to enquire before, but now a vague, unreasoning jealousy for those years which they had spent apart came upon him. He begged her to tell him all her history.

She hesitated. The subject was evidently a painful one.

"Why do you wish it? There is so little to tell, and what little there is I would willingly forget. I was born and educated at Rouen. My father was a notary. He died and then I went to Paris, where I acted as companion to a

rich lady. When I left her I came to Australia — that is all. It is not an exciting chronicle, is it?"

She laughed nervously and nestled closer to his side. But he had not learned enough to satisfy his curiosity.

"I do not understand. How came you North and a stowaway aboard the 'Queenslander'?"

"Oh, do not speak of that, I cannot tell even you. It is a part of my life that I must forget! You must never talk to me of it again. Do not, I implore you!"

She clung to him and looked so pleadingly into his face that he could not pursue the subject further. But he felt he would like to have been told all, to have known every year that they had spent apart.

They rose to go in. He placed his arm round her waist and drew her to him.

"My wife," he said, "my guardian angel. I am not worthy of your love. But I will try to be in the little time that is left to me. Believe me I will try!"

CHAPTER VI

THE EIGHTH WEEK

"Quae lucis miseris tam dira Cupido?" — VIRGIL.

A MONTH had elapsed since the wedding, and strange though it may appear, those four weeks were not four weeks of altogether unmixed happiness for Garfitt. He had entered the married state fully persuaded as to Céleste's devotion to himself. But this infatuation, he soon discovered, was not to be quite so one-sided as he had at first imagined. He had determined to prove himself as good a husband as any woman could wish to possess, but before the first week was over, he found he was doing much more than that, he was beginning to love her with a passionate adoration that was the very reverse of what he had at first mapped out for himself. In vain he argued with himself, in vain he protested and showed how sad the inevitable result would be. He could not check his passion, and what was

worse, he was beginning to feel that he would not if he could. Yet every day saw him growing physically weaker, and every hour found him looking forward with a greater fear to the separation that was slowly but surely coming to them. What was infinitely worse, he was compelled to see the agony depicted in her face as day by day she realized the further failure of his powers; to witness her bitter battling with Death for him: and all this with the haunting terror of the last dread scene continually hanging over them.

They were hardly separated for a moment. He could not bear her out of his sight, for they were all in all to each other. His thoughts were her thoughts, his pleasures her pleasures, and his fears her fears. And to think to what it was all leading! To know with absolute certainty, for one glimpse of Garfitt's face was sufficient to dispel any other hope, that only a few more weeks would find him gone, passed off the face of the earth, more irrevocably parted from her than if they had never met!

It had been his wish to find somebody who would nurse him till the end, to discover somebody to whom he could make his death a matter of concern. He had found that person,

and in the finding he had undone all his object—he did not want to die, he was beginning to discover that for that woman's sake he was a coward, unable to face that very rest which only a few weeks before he had so ardently desired. Bitterly his judgment rebuked him for his folly in having had anything to do with her, but at the very moment that it did so, Céleste appeared in the verandah, to seat herself by his side, and with her coming all his scruples vanished, and he found himself blessing that very fate which only a moment before he had reviled.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Little woman," he said softly, "can I ever make you see how good it is for me to have your love? I can hardly believe it yet. I thought once I should never know happiness again!"

"And you are really happy now?"

"Why, my life, since you came into it, has been one long happiness. Only because of you! You are the beginning and the end of all things for me! Don't you understand?"

She made one of her characteristic little gestures, and, rising, blew him a kiss from her fingers. Then taking a leaf from the creeper

above his head she placed it in his button-hole.

"A pretty compliment, my Prince! You are improving. That is your reward!"

"Tell me, are *you* happy, Céleste?"

"Can you ask? If I am not happy, there is no such thing! that is quite certain!"

"It is your nature to be happy, to be always bright, to carol from morning till night like a bird in summer."

"From morning till night I am with you—that is why!"

"I wonder if there have ever been two who loved as well as we?"

"Surely! But it seems hard to believe it!"

"And to think that we should have come together out of Chaos. Good heavens! I tremble when I imagine what I might have been by this time but for you, and yet it frightens me almost more to think of what I may be, through you."

"I do not understand."

"Give me back your hand and I'll try and tell you."

"Now!"

"Six weeks ago I learnt my fate. I was the most desperate and miserable of mortal

men. I was dying. I wanted to anticipate the end, but I had not the pluck. Then I realized how lonely I was in the world, and my soul cried out for somebody to love me till I died. I found that somebody—she did love me!”

“And then?”

“Why, in finding her I wrought my own ruin. In loving her I have discovered that I cannot die. Oh! Céleste, I am afraid to leave her—afraid to give up the happiness that has come too late!”

“Oh, Heaven; is there nothing I can do—no way in which I can fight for you?”

“Not one! It is too late! Too late!”

“I will not believe it. There must be a way. Oh, if I could only believe in a God!”

“You, Céleste, do—not—believe—in—a—God?”

He asked the question slowly as if he were half afraid to put it. Illogical though it may seem, though he did not believe himself, it seemed against reason that the woman he loved should be sceptical too.

“How can I? When He lets us suffer so!”

“But if you believed, what would you do?”

He pulled her down to him almost roughly.

“I would go to Him, lay myself before Him,

and offer my soul, all I possess, for your life, if only for six months. Surely a God of Pity would listen to such pleading!"

Garfitt was as white as that very Death of which they spoke. He trembled like the palsy. He could not look at her — he dared not. His very soul was rising within him in protest, in longing, in an agony of desire for life. What might he not rise to, what amends might he not make if only he were permitted this woman's love and a little longer life? The tension was almost greater than he could bear. He was in the act of imploring her to leave him, when he heard the sound of men ascending the hill path from the Township. Their voices were very familiar to him, and presently the owners emerged from the screen of foliage and came towards the house. They were three in number, Dick Prince, Will Harland, and a man who was known in the settlement, in honour of a certain episode in his career, as "Sankee's First Husband." They were all Pearlers, and they were just returned from cruises in the uttermost parts of the ocean.

They came into the verandah and greeted the sick man with considerable cordiality.

"Sorry to see you still under the weather,"

said Sankee's First Husband, feeling that it behoved him to be spokesman. "We all miss you out yonder!"

The others echoed this sentiment with elaborate politeness.

"That's good of you," said Garfitt in reply, "but never mind me. Sit yourselves down and tell me the news. It's manna to my hungry soul to talk to men who go down to the sea in ships and have their dealings in great waters."

Seating themselves, they lit their pipes, and the talk swept instantly forward on the subject with which each man was best acquainted. To Garfitt, after the agonizing few moments through which he had just passed, this whiff of his old life, this talk of the sea, was infinitely refreshing. He lay back and listened with unaffected pleasure. The names of schooners and skippers, of chiefs and islands, taboos, reefs, copra, *bêche-de-mer*, and tortoiseshell, came and went, flashing in and out of the talk like the points of knitting needles in a stocking.

"Know that reef on the other side of Pipa Lannu?" Dick Prince asked casually.

"Which one?" said Garfitt with sudden interest, his eyes flashing. "I know the one running from the south-west end of the island,

four miles, beginning opposite the high conical hill."

"That's it. Well, the 'Pearl Queen' has gone. Piled up there!"

"How did it happen?"

"Nobody knows. Some mistake somewhere. Perhaps you can tell us. Where's the best anchorage?"

"Why, pick up the reddish cliff, and go straight for it; as you close it up you'll sight a black streak on the side of the hill; keep that open of the bluff to the northward of it, bearing S. 43° W. to clear the reef on both sides of the entrance; then steer to the south-west, taking care to avoid the shoal water off the southern shore, until the bluff southward of north head bears N.N.E., then steer S.S.W. until the low sand point bears S.S.E.; then haul quickly up towards the point in order to clear the extension of the mud flats off the western shore."

"Good man! You haven't forgotten it!"

"Heavens, no! And never shall! It's lovely to talk of it again. Did you ever hear how I came to know it so well?"

"No."

"It's a good yarn and I'll tell you."

He settled himself back in his chair and took

Céleste's hand in his. She was watching him and rejoicing to see the look of pleasure in his face.

"Do you remember Billy Pete who bought the 'Merry Monarch' from Mynheer Dunk?"

All the men nodded. The history of the famous Billy Pete and Mynheer Dunk, who was afterwards hung in Brisbane for the murder of his mate, was perfectly familiar to them.

"Well, Billy thought wonders of his Schooner, and there was nothing in the wide, wide world that he was not going to do with her. Somehow or other he got wind of a Pearl Patch to the South East of Marka-Marka, and nothing would suit him but he must be off to try for it. All his friends warned him against it, you must understand, myself included. Well, after a bit, six months may be, back comes Billy, carrying side enough for the skipper of an Orient Liner. Brags all over the settlement about the shell he's got, laughs at us for laughing at him, makes presents of Pearl to the girls, and after a bit goes off again. Then a year goes by and nothing is heard of Billy—dead, everybody says. I thought so too, but we were mistaken."

He paused to recover his breath. So much talking was very difficult for him; Céleste watched him anxiously.

"My next trip took me down that way. Being in the neighbourhood I thought I'd have a look at Marka-Marka, and see if Billy were still there, and if so how he was getting on. You all know the bearings. Well, we fetched up alongside it just at dusk one evening, and anchored in 8 fathoms about $3\frac{1}{2}$ cables off the north-west end of the Island in sand and coral. Next morning, first thing, I had a look round, and there on the reef, not more than ten cables away, lay the 'Merry Monarch,' piled up just as beautifully as you could wish. And by the look of her she had been there some time."

"Anybody aboard?"

"Not a soul. Well, thinks I, this is the end of Billy Pete's scheme. I wonder where he is now! And with that I pulled ashore and set myself for a tramp about the island. It's not a big place, you know, but though I turned over every corner of it, not a sign of Billy or his crew could I discover."

"Picked up by some boat?" suggested Sankee's First Husband.

"That's what I thought, so I up anchor and sailed away. But first, just for curiosity's sake, I put into Pipa Lannu, ten miles to the Southward. Now, you who've been there know

that the two islands are exactly alike, so much so that a man has to know every rock and tree on them to tell the difference. We went in as I described just now, and I pulled ashore. I tramped up one beach and down another, crossed the hill and plunged into the valley, but not a sign of a soul, nigger or otherwise, could I discover. Being a little tired I sat down on a log to rest. 'Billy Pete's gone up,' said I to myself, 'sailing schooners in the New Jerusalem by this time.' The words were hardly out of my mouth before I heard a cough, and on looking round, there was Billy, sitting just as calm as you please, on another log watching me. At first I thought I was seeing a ghost, but I didn't think so long. 'Why, Billy, old man,' I said, 'this is a rum go! What the deuce are you doing here?' 'Hush,' says he, his finger on his lips. 'Not so loud or they'll hear you!' 'Who do you mean?' I asked, 'who'll hear?' 'The Sea Women,' says he. Then I saw that he was gone clean daft. 'Where's your Schooner?' says I. 'Round there,' he answers, 'piled up on the reef. I couldn't help it. I heard them coo'eeing as I came in, and that put me off, and before I knew where I was, we were straddled right across the reef. All

the hands went overboard and I swam ashore.' 'Nonsense,' I said, 'that was on Marka-Marka.' 'Well, I know,' he went on, 'and here I've been ever since.' 'But how did you come *here*? You couldn't have swum ten miles across the Strait with that tide-rip.' 'Across what Strait?' 'Why, Pipa Lannu!' 'Think I'm a fool?' says he, 'I don't want to swim any Strait. Marka-Marka's good enough for me.' 'But this is Pipa Lannu!' says I. 'That be hanged for a yarn!' he replied. 'Don't I tell you I was wrecked on Marka-Marka, and here I've been ever since.' 'But I saw your Schooner on Marka-Marka, and this is Pipa Lannu. How did you get across the Strait?' 'I haven't got across any Strait. How could I? I tell you this is Marka-Marka!' And then we went at it hard as we could go for close on half an hour. But do you believe I could convince that lunatic that he wasn't on the island where he'd been wrecked? No, that I couldn't."

"But how *did* he get across?"

"He couldn't say, and I couldn't tell him! At any rate he didn't swim it because that tide-rip would have carried him to Jericho; — there were no natives to take him, and no schooner would have put him ashore again having once

got him aboard, would she? For weeks I fretted myself gray over it. But it was no good. It's still the biggest mystery I ever came across, and I'd give a lot to know the truth of it."

"And where is he now?"

"In the Yarra Bend Asylum. If either of you are ever in Melbourne, you might go and look him up and ask him how he crossed the straits of Pipa Lannu. He'd be glad to see a visitor."

"By the way, Garfitt," said Harland, after the pause that followed their host's story, "you haven't seen the Padre's visitor yet, have you?"

"Didn't know he had one. Who is he? and when did he arrive?"

"In the mail-boat yesterday. I don't know who he is, but in appearance he's just the dandiest Frenchman you ever saw out of Paris. Got a letter of introduction to the Padre, I believe. At any rate they're as thick as thieves, and I heard him say he was going to bring him up to call on you."

Céleste did not look overjoyed at this news. She had no desire to see any of her countrymen. She was trying to become an Englishwoman, not only in her talk [her English was progressing admirably], but also in her sympathies. Then

the conversation swept on again from one subject to another, and all the time Garfitt listened with a longing and a heartache that showed itself in every word he uttered. What would he not have given to have been able to take another voyage; to see once more those entrancing islands, to feel the rocking seas under him, and to taste again that wild, delirious joy of living. Existence was becoming too sweet to him, who had thought himself done with it for ever. It was Céleste who had brought this confusion into his life; being all in all to him, she was the cause of this new and terrible order of things. One thing was hideously certain, if he did not stop before it was too late, he would show himself the most miserable of cowards directly. Yes! He would take care, he would not let this love master him. It was not too late, there was yet time to cast it from him. If he could only make the plunge, there was at least one way open. It flashed through him like an electric shock, making him tingle from top to toe. Supposing he should make one last effort, forget what she was to him, forget what she had done for him, put everything behind him and go to sea once more? There were men who would take him, he would pay for the

privilege, and he would leave all the money that remained to Céleste. The voyage would kill him quickly, and though she would feel it acutely at first, it would be best for both of them in the end. Yes, he would go. He would ask one of these men to take him, and then under cover of night he would steal away. A verse of Swinburne's echoed and re-echoed in his brain —

*"Let us rise up and part; she will not know.
Let us go seaward as the great winds go,
Full of blown sand and foam; what help is there?
There is no help, for all these things are so,
And all the world is bitter as a tear.
And how these things are, though ye strove to
show, she would not know."*

Céleste excused herself and went into the house to prepare his lunch. At this hint the men rose to leave, and Garfitt bade them all, with the exception of Dick Prince, good-bye.

"Stay a minute or two longer," he said to the last named, "I want to talk to you."

Dick seated himself again, and Garfitt went on.

"Old man, I did you a good turn once?"

"You did, and I haven't forgotten it! What's up? anything wrong?"

"Wrong, yes. Eternally wrong! Dick, you can see I'm done for, can't you? Well, I've schooled myself for it. I wanted to go — I pined to be out of it all. Then this woman came. My God! she has made my life Heaven to me, neither more nor less. What's the result? I know I'm dying. There's no reprieve. It's all up with me, and now when it's too late, I can't die, I'm turning coward. Afraid to face it for her sake, and every hour is making it worse. Another week and I shall be mad with fear."

"Poor old chap! And what can I do?"

"Do! I'll tell you what you can do. You can take me away. Help me to escape from the woman I love better than all the world. Take me back to sea—you sail to-morrow. Let me go with you. You'll do it, old mate? I'll be no trouble, and I swear a week will see the end of me. Then you can drop me overboard and be done with me for ever. Think what a little it means to you, and on the other hand, think of me lying here growing weaker every day, loving that woman more and more, and hoping against hope for the life that any fool can see will never be permitted me!"

"But think of her?"

"I have thought. Thought and thought. And on my oath I think I'm doing right. It will hurt her cruelly at first, but it will not hurt as much as watching me fade day by day. Think of the long drawn agony of it. Say you'll do it, old mate!"

"I'll tell you what—give yourself to-day to think it over. Let me know to-morrow morning, and if you still wish it then, I swear I'll do it for you!"

"God bless you! I knew you would."

"Good-bye. You believe I'm sorry for you—real, downright sorry, don't you?"

"I do! Good-bye."

Dick shook hands with him gravely, and his handsome, devil-may-care face was very solemn. Then he went down the hill ruminating on the strange fates Life brought to the men of his acquaintance. As he disappeared, Céleste returned to the verandah with Garfitt's lunch, but the latter put it from him. His brain was too full of the resolution he had just made to eat, and what was worse, he could not look Céleste in the face, lest she might somehow come to suspect what was in his mind.

During the afternoon the Padre looked in upon them, bringing with him the Frenchman of

whom Will Harland had spoken. Garfitt was alone in the verandah when they arrived, and it was with some difficulty he rose to receive them.

"My dear Garfitt," said the Padre, "I have taken the liberty of bringing up my friend Monsieur Darniac to make your acquaintance, and to see the lovely view from your verandah. Mr. Garfitt, Monsieur Darniac."

Garfitt bowed gravely and motioned the Frenchman to a seat. The latter was exactly what Harland had described him, a typical Parisian, as neat as a new pin, and looking refreshingly cool in his white attire, pith helmet, and pipeclayed shoes. Garfitt opened the conversation.

"You have only just arrived in the Island, I believe?"

"Yesterday — by the mail-boat 'India.' I joined her in Batavia."

"You know this part of the world?"

"Only slightly — but I hope, for business purposes, to have the opportunity of knowing it better ere long. You are intimately acquainted with it, of course?"

"Few better," Garfitt answered with a short laugh, "but unlike you, I shall never get a

chance of putting my knowledge to any practical use."

Both the Padre and his friend understood the significance of his words. Suddenly attracted by something, the former rose and went into the house, leaving his friends alone. Presently Darniac said —

"You must have seen some strange life during your stay here?"

"Very strange. This place is one of the few rag bags left to civilization. But it won't be so long — we're changing fast. There are three lines of mail-boats touching every week, we've got a Post Office, a hospital, a plethora of missionaries, and I hear there's some talk of building a School of Arts."

"You don't favour the advance of civilization then?"

"Hardly, — I am a victim of it myself."

"Will you pardon my rudeness, but it seems to me I have seen your face somewhere before."

"Possibly. I was a rather cosmopolite once."

"Did you ever shoot at Monte Carlo?"

"Once or twice."

"I fancy you wintered in Rome in '80?"

"Very likely."

"Ah! Then, forgive me — I thought I knew you, you are —"

"Will you excuse me. I have no desire to remember who I was. My name is Garfitt. I live, or rather am dying, in Thursday Island. You will do me a favour if you will remember only that."

"Since you wish it, with pleasure. Ah! Here is our friend."

The Padre resumed his seat, and so they chatted on till Garfitt told himself that he did not like this smooth spoken Frenchman, who watched him with such deep-set, glittering eyes. There was too much of the snake about him for his taste. He began to wish Céleste would come and relieve him of the task of entertaining him.

Monsieur Darniac was by way of being an enthusiastic Botanist, and the Padre was soon engaged in a lecture on the flora of the islands, with illustrations. But though the Frenchman appeared to be interested, Garfitt saw that his thoughts were not with the matter in hand.

Then Céleste entered the verandah, and both men rose to greet her. She saw the Padre first and shook hands with him, and having done this she turned towards the visitor.

"May I have the pleasure of introducing to

you my friend, Monsieur Darniac?" said the Padre.

Céleste looked at her countryman, and as she did so, an extraordinary pallor spread across her face. For one moment she trembled like a reed before the wind. Then recovering herself, she bowed gravely, and said —

"Have you been long in the Island, Monsieur?"

"I only arrived yesterday, Madame."

"I am afraid you will find it rather uninteresting!"

"On the contrary, I expect I shall find its fascinations, if anything, too absorbing. I have some important business to conduct here."

"Ah, that alters the case, doesn't it? Do you intend to make a long stay?"

"It will quite depend upon that business, Madame!"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. The Padre, watching her face, noticed its intensity of expression and wondered. He would have wondered still more had he seen his friend, on saying farewell, slip a tiny note into her hand.

When they had made their adieux Céleste went into the house, and it was some time before she returned to the verandah. When

she did, Garfitt saw that she had been crying. Her manner was strangely cold and distant. This was almost more than he could bear. He attributed it to the thoughts engendered by this meeting with her countryman. But in view of what he was about to do himself, he did not comment on it. So the afternoon wore on. The sun went down, and still the same chill remained upon them.

"I haven't the villainy to try and comfort her," he said to himself. "To-morrow I shall be gone, and then it will be all over for ever. For ever! Oh, miserable wretch that I am! To think I shall never look upon her face again!"

He heard the big frog in the empty room behind him catch his supper. "There's Destiny again!" he muttered with a little sigh. "All things considered, I don't know that there's so very much difference between that insect and myself!"

CHAPTER VII

THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY

"The cold dead hand of the Past." — HOLMES.

THE moon was just a rim of gold upon the hill top when Céleste left the house that evening. She had excused herself to Garfitt on the plea that she intended visiting the Township, but though she went down the path among the Castor Oil bushes, that was not her real destination. Once past the Aloe hedge, she turned sharply to the left, and bore away through the scrub towards the big rocks at the eastern extremity of the Island. The evening was very still and picturesque, but Céleste was too much absorbed in her own thoughts to notice its beauty. She was scheming out the interview that lay before her.

Arriving at the place she sought, she seated herself in the shadow of a tree, and waited for the appearance of the man whom she had come to meet. Minutes went by and he did not show

himself—more minutes, until nearly half an hour had passed. There is nothing, perhaps, so trying to one's temper as being compelled to wait when the business is important, and she began to fear lest the resolutions she had formed should give way before she was permitted an opportunity of putting them into practice.

Presently, however, the bushes parted on the other side of the plateau, and a man entered the moonlight. He was dressed in white, with scrupulous neatness, and carried a half smoked cigarette in his hand. On reaching the centre of the open space he paused a moment and looked about him, then observing the figure in the shadow, he crossed towards it, raising his hat with elaborate politeness as he came.

"My dear Céleste," he said sweetly, "I must entreat your pardon if I have kept you waiting. It is so difficult to recognise places in this weird moonlight. I overshot the mark and had to turn back again."

"That is not true. You have come direct from the settlement. I saw you leave the Padre's House, and sitting here I have watched you walk along the beach. That falsehood is not a good augury for what you have to say to me!"

He laughed airily, not in the least abashed by this rebuke.

"My dear girl, I am rejoiced to see that you are as sharp as ever. It was certainly not for nothing that our friends used to call you the — "

"Not that name. I will not have it. I have done with it for ever!"

"As you please, of course. You know I would not give you pain for anything. Still one is bound to remember that there was a time when one could not please you more than to call you by it. But it was not to talk about that that I asked you to meet me here!"

He paused for her to say something. It was one of his little peculiarities to stop suddenly in his conversation, in order to take his audience by surprise and put them to the inconvenience of saying something. He was well versed in all the little details of giving annoyance to others, was trim, debonnaire Monsieur Darniac. But Céleste did not speak, she only scratched in the dry earth with the toe of her boot.

"Can you guess, Céleste, why I asked you to come to-night?"

"Because you wanted to see me, I imagine!"

"Why should I want to see you then?"

"Because you have something to say to me, I suppose!"

"Wonderful woman! Of course I want to see you because I have something to say to you. And what do you think I want to say to you?"

"Something that you are afraid to utter where there is anyone to overhear you."

"What a truly wonderful woman! Her sharpness is extraordinary. I ask her to meet me here because I want to see her. And I want to see her because I have something to say to her, and I have something to say to her that will not bear saying within four walls! It's like a word puzzle! It's like what your English friends would call the House that Jack built!"

Again he stopped abruptly. Again there was an awkward pause. Once more she did not volunteer any remark.

"I think, considering that this is the first time you have seen me for many years, you are just a little quiet, my dear Céleste?"

"Very likely. I am not, as a rule, very talkative!"

"And yet I remember —"

"I don't wish you to remember. Confine yourself to the business of the present."

"With every pleasure in life. Therefore

before we say any more, I must, with your permission, congratulate you on one thing!"

"What?"

"Your escape!"

She looked half round to see that there was no one near them.

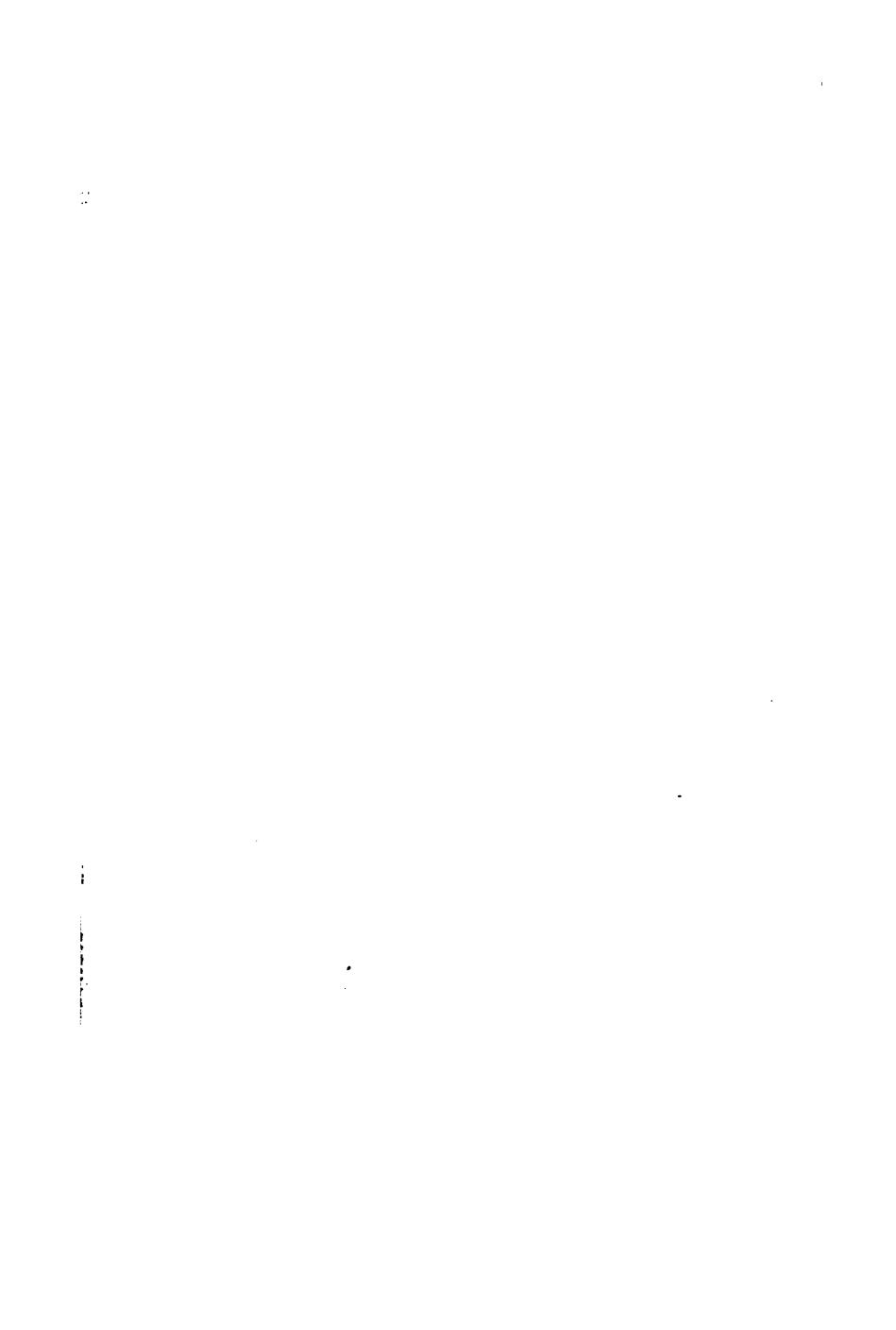
"My dear, you need not have the slightest fear. We are quite alone. Yes, I congratulate you on your escape. I was in Bombay when the news came to me. 'Ah, the wonderful Céleste!' I said to myself, 'there is no one like her!' Accordingly I posted off *via* Calcutta and Singapore, caught the 'India' in Batavia, and reached here, as you are aware, yesterday. A passenger on board gave me a letter of introduction to your friend the missionary, and I quartered myself upon him. Really, I could quite understand your surprise at seeing me this morning!"

"If no one had been present, I think I should have killed you, but —"

"Exactly — *but!* Let me congratulate you once more. It was cleverly managed, though I don't quite understand the way you did it. How many years had you still to run?"

She stamped her foot angrily.

"How many more times must I tell you that I will not answer you!"





"I defy you and all the others to move me."

"I beg your pardon. My memory is so treacherous. I had forgotten. Well, since you object to it, we will not press the point. However, that brings us to the one question of supreme importance — and that is?"

He threw his cigarette away and lit another. She did not speak.

"And that is, my dear Céleste, what you propose to do now?"

"To remain here."

He laughed softly, as though her answer amused him.

"You always had such humorous ideas! Remain here, in this hole! Ah! Very good indeed!"

"Be quiet. I will not have you laugh like that. Yes, I shall stay here, and I defy you and all the others to move me!"

"Not defy, Céleste, surely I did not hear aright!"

"Quite right. I defy you all to move me!"

"But my dearest girl, my infinitely charming Céleste, I —"

"I forbid you to speak to me like that."

"Remain here. Well, well! The humour is delicious. But we must not waste time. Seriously, when will you be ready to accompany me?"

"Never!"

"I must confess I am getting a little tired of this jesting. I say when?"

"And I tell you never. I have done with that sort of life for ever!"

"Really, I think you are almost inclined to be wilful this evening. I am doing my best to be good tempered. I want to do all I can for you. Nothing is further from my thoughts than to attempt to hurry you, and yet I cannot stay here for ever!"

"Then go!"

"Excellent! But you see I cannot go without you, my dear. You are too useful to us, far too useful. Our sorrow has been complete. We thought we had lost your valuable services for many years to come. Now that we have you again, we shall not let you slip so easily. Besides, think of the danger you are running here."

"I am willing to risk that!"

"Possibly, but we are not, you see. We love you so much that we cannot let you take it upon yourself. By the way, the innocent young fledgling with whom I am domesticating tells me something of a romantic attachment. I presume that interesting invalid, in whose

house I saw you this morning, is a pigeon worth plucking?"

She moved a step nearer to him.

"One word more like that, and I promise you I'll strangle you where you stand!"

She put up her hand, and he clutched her by the wrist as if he feared she might carry out her threat.

"Ah! you would! No, my dear Céleste, not this evening, if I know it!"

"Let me go — you are hurting me!"

He relinquished her hand, bowing as he did so.

"Ten thousand apologies, I'm sure. I fancied you might fall. What were we saying? Ah! I remember. I asked when you would be ready to accompany me away?"

"And I said never!"

"You will reconsider that?"

"I shall not. I have given you my decision, and if you attempt to make me change it, I'll put those on your track who'll hound you out of this place like a whipped cur."

"You are not very complimentary. However, I'll pardon it under the circumstances. At any rate, that's enough talking. Now listen to me. The China Mail will touch here on

Friday. I shall book two passages in her. One for you—one for myself. You will make what excuses you please to your friends, but you will accompany me on board her. Do you understand?”

“And the penalty if I do not go?”

“I shall acquaint the Queensland Police of your whereabouts, and you will be shipped back to your home in the Pacific. I should be sorry to destroy your friends’ illusions. Possibly they have no idea what a distinguished guest they have the honour of entertaining. By the way, I wonder what your consumptive friend would say if he knew all!”

“You would not be inhuman enough to tell him?”

“Not if you promise to come with me next week. It would be a pity for you to part with ill-feeling between you!”

“I cannot, I will not come!”

“Am I to go over all the old, tedious arguments again?”

“No, no! But have you no mercy?”

“My dear Céleste, pray don’t be absurd. I would willingly oblige you if I could, but you know or ought to know that it’s impossible. You are more precious to us than, well we’ll

say than diamonds, and since we have been deprived of your services so long, we are the more bound to make up for it now. What does it matter? You will have to part sooner or later, and I cannot believe that you are so deeply enamoured of this lachrymose Englishman that it will break your heart to give him up!"

"I love him more than my life. When all the world was against me, he took my part. He saved me from starvation or worse. He has given me a home! — respect — love!"

"We are most grateful to him, I'm sure, but none the less we cannot let your devotion to him make you neglectful of us."

"He is dying."

"Then he will not feel your departure for so long!"

"You do not seem to realize that I am his wife!"

"His what? Pardon me if I did not hear aright. You did not say his wife?"

"I did! I am his wife, and I cannot, I will not leave him to die alone."

"You must indeed have been hard hit!"

"Gaston! I will make a bargain with you!"

"By all means. What is it? Let us hear it."

"Let me remain with him, undisturbed, until he dies, and then, though I swore I would never have anything to do with you again—I will go!"

"How long will that be?"

"Not more than a month at the very longest. Do that and I will come with you and you can do what you like with me."

"A month?"

"Yes—only a month. You see how weak he is—he is growing weaker every day. There is no help for him. And I cannot let him die alone!"

"You give me your word that you will come then?"

"I give you my word. You shall do with me as you please then!"

"Well, to show you that I am not altogether without feeling, I will agree to that. You shall stay with him until he dies, and then we'll set off together. There is no time to lose, for we are making preparations for a master stroke, and we have all been lamenting that you could not have a hand in it."

"What villainy are you contemplating now?"

"Ah, dear girl, again you are not complimentary! However, you shall know soon enough. It is a secret now. Rest assured, it is something worthy even of your reputation. One of the biggest things we have ever undertaken. By the way, you don't think anyone here suspects your history?"

"No, I'm quite sure of it!"

"And you have a nice home up the hill yonder. I was charmed with it to-day!"

"I have made it all myself. Every bit of it. Built it up out of nothing. And now it is to be scattered to the winds again. O! wretched woman that I am!"

"My dear, you must not talk like that. You must trust to me, your true friend, Darniac, and let me comfort you in your sorrow. Remember you have a month together yet!"

"Have you anything more to say to me?"

"I think not. At any rate, if I have, it will keep. I intend to constitute myself the friend of your house, you know. I shall drop in often."

"To remind me of my bond!"

"No! I trust to your honour for that. Still, I shall keep my eye upon you all the same. And now, as we have arranged matters so amicably, let us be going home—people might

suspect something if they saw us so long together, and I have no wish to lose the patronage of our amiable young friend down yonder. Let us start!"

The moon had long since disappeared behind the hill, and the road was very dark. Darniac's amiability had quite returned to him, and as he walked he talked of Paris and the days they had spent together, hummed little snatches of songs, and conducted himself altogether as if he were Céleste's nearest and dearest friend on earth.

When they reached the beach opposite her house they separated, Darniac going on beside the water to the Township, Céleste ascending the hill to her own abode. She found Garfitt in the verandah, fanning himself with a Kadjang leaf. He had been listening for her footstep for some time past, his brain tortured with many thoughts. The evening had been one long-drawn agony to him. And yet he knew the torture would have been infinitely more acute had she remained at home. During her absence he had subjected himself to the severest cross-examination possible. He had deliberated the question of his departure over and over again, and the result was even less satisfactory than before; he was unconvinced whether he should go or stay. It was too

humiliating, for, do what he would, he could not find courage enough to break up his home and to say good-bye to her.

Céleste knelt on the floor by his side and took his hand. After her interview with Darniac she felt strangely nervous. What would the result be if this man, whose good opinion she had struggled so hard to win, should learn her secret? Would his love continue when he discovered the guilty woman she really was? She very much doubted it.

"Céleste, you don't know how long this hour that you have been away has seemed to me!" he said.

She kissed the hand she held but did not answer. Unknown to him she was crying. One of her tears fell on his wrist and stung him like a lash. It showed him his position more clearly than any other argument could have done. He turned his head towards her, and in that flash made up his mind.

"Céleste! Little sweetheart," he asked very softly, "why are you crying?"

"It is nothing!" she answered. "I am a little tired to-night, that is all!"

"That is not the real reason. Tell me the truth. You are hiding something from me."

"No! No! Only I cannot bear to see you lying here so weak."

"Is that all? Really? Honour bright?"

"Really—honour bright!"

"You swear it?"

"I swear it!"

"Now, let me have my say. I have something serious to tell you. Do you know, Céleste, I was very near doing you a great injustice to-day. And yet somehow I did not mean it to be an injustice. I meant it only for kindness."

"What was it?"

"You will forgive me?"

"I forgive you freely."

"Céleste, I was thinking of leaving you. Of going away!"

"Of leaving me? Oh, no! I cannot believe that!"

"But it is true. I thought it would be the kinder course. I saw how my weakness was hurting you—I saw how it pained you to watch me growing more and more helpless every day. And then I wondered, if you feel it so now, how you will feel it—when the end comes, when I am so weak that I cannot lift my head—so weak that I have not even strength to kiss your hand! So! Then I said to myself—

'My mind is made up. She shall not see me like that — I will go away. I will get one of my friends to take me out to sea and let me die there. The pain will be sharp to her at first, but it will spare her all the other later agony.' "

"You do not know! But go on!"

"Well, this idea was only half formed in my mind, until I heard those men talking this morning. Then, being unable to resist it any longer, I asked my friend, Dick Prince, if he would help me. He consented. To-night while you have been away I have thought it out. Gone over and over it till I have made a discovery."

"And that is?"

"That whatever the result may be, I cannot go. Oh! Céleste, my love, my love. My guardian angel. I know now how much you are to me. If the torture is to be even greater than I imagine, I cannot go. I have turned coward for your sake. You must never leave me, I cannot bear you out of my sight. Let me hold to you, cling to you, make the most of you while I have the strength. Let us be together always that I may have something to remember — when I am gone — if there be any remembrance in the place to which I go! "

"Oh, why cannot we believe in a Heaven?"

"I don't know. I cannot say. I have mocked and scoffed at everything. I have been tossed to and fro on the Ocean of Uncertainty all these years. I have tried to believe, I have struggled to believe. I would give anything to believe, but there seems to be always something wanting, and I cannot!"

She grasped his hand in both of hers, and together they sat in the darkness, side by side, fighting, so it seemed to them, against all the superstition of the world. Céleste saw that Garfitt was exciting himself more than was prudent, and she tried to soothe him, but it was in vain, he was wound up and it was hopeless to attempt to stop him till his torrent had worn itself out.

"Céleste," he said, when his passionate outburst had a little subsided, "when I am gone, you will go away from here?"

"Oh! Let us shut our thoughts to that awful day. Do not let us think of such a thing!"

"But we must, my girl! We must arrange everything. I may go off at any moment, and I must not leave you unprepared."

"What would you wish me to do?"

"To go away as soon as possible—to go home to France. I have left you everything. We have not spent a quarter of our capital, and there should be enough to see you safely there, and perhaps to keep you in moderate comfort for a year or even two. Besides, to-morrow I shall write to my family and tell them that you are my wife, and when they know where you settle, in all justice they must continue the allowance they have made to me."

"You are too good to me! Much too good!"

"Nothing is too good for you, Céleste! The best and purest of living women. You have been my good angel. You have done for me more than woman ever did for mortal man. How can I repay a quarter of the debt I owe you!"

Choking down a sob he rose and went into the house. She stood for a moment alone, watching the palm leaves rocking on the evening breeze.

"His good angel!" she said, "the best and purest of living women! Oh! if he knew all. If he only knew!"

CHAPTER VIII

FIFTEEN DAYS LATER

"Beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster that doth mock
The meat it feeds on."

—*Othello*, III. 3.

AFTER his first call at the house on the hill side, there was no man more constant in his visits than Monsieur Darniac. He was there continually, and every time he went he exerted all his talents to please. He was a well-read man, a polished conversationalist, and a humorist of no mean order. He always knew the right thing to say, and he as invariably said it. He was never familiar, yet always friendly. He had seen a great deal of the world, studied men and manners in the most civilized as well as the most out-of-the-way places, and he was not averse to giving others the benefit of his experiences. When he was present time flew swiftly, and indeed, so much was his society appreciated,

that Garfitt, to his own surprise, found himself forgetting his first distrust, always looking forward to his visits, and invariably regretting the moment of farewell. To Céleste, Darniac was scrupulously polite. Never by word or deed did he suggest that they had met before. He allowed no opportunity to slip of doing her little services, but it was always with the air of one who was quite a new friend, until, despite her fear of him, she could not but admit to herself that his presence was not as disagreeable as she would otherwise have expected. Garfitt noticed this one morning, and for the first time a jealous chill passed over him. What if this man should fall in love with Céleste? What if she should fall in love with him? What would his position be then? He only harboured the thought for an instant, and then dismissed it from his mind as ungenerous to her. But it returned upon him again and again, until it became so firmly rooted that it would not be driven out.

One afternoon, lest Céleste should read in his face what was in his mind, he went for a walk to the Township. At the cost of considerable strength he managed to get as far as the Hotel of All Nations; and since the Devil

seldom throws away a chance of appropriating souls, it so happened that Sankee's First Husband lolled in the verandah. He was dissipating his hard-earned savings as fast as possible, and he hailed with delight the prospect of a companion. They entered the Bar together, and for the first time since his marriage, Garfitt called for brandy.

The bottle was placed before him, and, according to the custom of the country, he helped himself. The first two glasses were as nothing, the third was somewhat better, while the fourth sent the blood coursing through his veins in a highly pleasant fashion. The fifth improved his prospects wonderfully, brought out the vivid colours of the whiskey advertisements on the walls, and, while lessening his fears of Darniac, told him that life was almost worth living after all. His companion made a joke. Garfitt threw his head back and laughed as he had not laughed for months. Why hadn't he thought of this before? He would certainly take some bottles home with him that he might continue to enjoy these same delightful sensations undisturbed.

This idea he faithfully carried out, with the result that he was compelled to send a boy for a further supply next day. By the time this

was finished he had experienced many things. Among others, his appearance had somewhat changed. His hands had taken to shaking so much that he dared not shave, new lines had formed themselves round the corners of his mouth, there was generally a dull sort of pain at the back of his head, while big black spots hovered and danced continually before his eyes. Céleste noticed the alteration in him and wondered what it all might mean. She was not aware that he had visited the Township, and though she had undeniable evidence before her that he was drinking deeply, she could not find a trace of liquor upon the premises.

Darniac was teaching her Chess, and, every morning, the games at the table in the creeper-covered verandah, were provocative of much mirth. Garfitt, from his couch, watched the players with sullen, bloodshot eyes, and as he did so, he determined in his own mind that there was a mutual understanding between the pair. At first he wondered if it were the creation of the brandy. But as his suspicions were confirmed, the old twinge of jealousy returned upon him with double intensity.

One morning, the game finished, Darniac rose to go. He thanked Céleste for the

pleasure she had given him, and then bade his host "good-bye." It was Garfitt's usual custom to invite him to remain to luncheon; on this occasion, however, he said stiffly, "good-morning," and allowed his visitor to leave the house without another word. When he was gone Céleste turned to him with an enquiring face —

"You did not ask him to stay?"

"I certainly did not. I fail to see that I am called upon to feed every mysterious Frenchman who does us the honour to visit us."

She did not answer, but her face looked troubled. She divined that Garfitt was growing jealous of this man, and she saw also that he suspected some sort of contraband intimacy between them. What was she to do? She was in such an invidious position, and she knew that the least mistake on her part would shatter their mutual peace for ever. Of course coldness to her countryman would set her husband's fears at rest once and for all. But on the other hand, such a course would have the effect of angering Darniac, and then it would be impossible to tell what revenge he might not take. She was growing very nervous.

The following morning Darniac called again.

He found his host alone in the verandah, picking at the cane work of his chair with nervous fingers. Seating himself he rolled a cigarette. For some time they chatted on different subjects, but all the while Garfitt saw that his rival was only waiting for Céleste. Presently she joined them. Though her greeting was kind enough, it did not take Darniac very long to understand that she was afraid to make it warmer lest she should arouse her husband's jealousy. It pleased him to feel that a certain constraint was upon the pair, and still more to know that it was occasioned by his presence. He had been considering Céleste a great deal lately. She had changed in a hundred ways since he had last seen her, and he told himself they were all for the better. There was a certain softness about her manner now that was not used to be there. Decidedly, its presence was an improvement. Indeed, it was a long time since he had seen anyone more charming, and he began to entertain himself with very pleasant thoughts regarding her.

Garfitt watched them with suspicious eyes. He saw her constraint, and he saw the efforts the other was making to break through it. He began to see his own position in a new light.

Here was a man, he argued, her fellow-countryman, good looking, irreproachably dressed, of courtly manners, and evidently of considerable wealth, wooing the woman he loved. What had he to put against such advantages? A shattered constitution, a pale, haggard face, almost immediate death, and, well — certainly a meagre banking account! Obviously the balance stood in his enemy's favour. He continued to watch them. The situation was becoming critical, and a nasty look of malice was growing in Darniac's face. Once more the call came to an end, once more he rose to go, and once more Garfitt failed to issue the usual invitation. Darniac bowed to him and turned towards Céleste. With a pale face she offered her hand. He took it, held it tightly, and raised it to his lips, looking at Garfitt as he did so. Then with a gay adieu he lifted his hat, descended the steps, and went his way down the path humming a rippling chanson.

For nearly a minute after he had left the house the couple in the verandah sat silent. Garfitt was the first to speak, and Céleste was terrified at the tone he used.

"Remember, that man never enters my house again!"

"You do not think he meant anything more than common courtesy by his action?"

"I do not think anything. I am sure!"

"John!" she said, approaching him with a look of almost terror in her face. "You do not, you cannot imagine — that — there — is — anything — between that man and me?"

"I tell you I do not imagine anything. Now leave me!"

"You wrong me. You are unjust. I swear you are!"

"I have not said that I imagine anything."

"But you have implied it!"

"I imply nothing. Leave me!"

She went without another word. Garfitt laid himself back on his couch and closed his eyes. When the coast was clear he visited a secret place he knew of at the end of the verandah, and pulled himself together from a brandy bottle hidden there. This done he faced the situation, and again bitterly reproached himself. What a poor, miserable dolt he had been! Why had he ever taken this woman into his house? And what was worse, why had he ever allowed her to eat her way into his heart? That she had some secret understanding with this man he was quite sure. Had he not seen it with his own

eyes? No evidence could have been plainer. What did she intend to do now? As for himself, what could he do? Oh, why had he not gone away with Dick Prince? Had he done so, he might have been dead and overboard by this time, and what would have been better still, he would then have died, believing to the last in her love and devotion to himself. Now she would probably sacrifice him to this countryman of hers, and in doing so would leave him to die alone in a desolation that would be ten thousand times more terrible than before. But they should not get off scot free. Not they!

The farce of luncheon came and went, and still the same cloud covered them. Céleste did her duty by him to the letter, but there was an expression of despair upon her face that looked as if it never could be lifted. The meal over, he returned to his couch in the verandah, and she to her household duties. And so the afternoon wore on!

Towards sundown, Garfitt espied a little Solomon boy coming up the path from the Township. He carried a letter in his hand, and was edging his way round the Aloes in order to get to the back of the house without attracting the attention of the front. At first

his movements had but little interest for Garfitt, but suddenly a thought flashed through his brain. With its coming he rose from his couch, crossed the verandah, and went down to intercept him.

"Give me that letter," he said.

The boy demurred, but Garfitt held him by the arm.

"If you don't give it me, I'll cut your throat from ear to ear. Come, hand it over."

Thus menaced, the boy surrendered it.

"Now come with me to the verandah, and I'll tell you if there's an answer."

They went back to the house, where Garfitt opened the letter. It was unaddressed, but he did not need to be told for whom it was intended. It was very short, and read as follows:—

"Affairs have come to a climax. There is no hope for it, we must leave by the mail-boat at eleven to-night. I have arranged everything. Refuse, and you know the consequences."

Garfitt turned it over and over. Then with extraordinary calmness he said to the boy—

"You will go back to the man who gave

you this and say, the lady says, 'If you want me to come, be at the Black Rock at the east end of the Island at eight o'clock to-night.' Here is half-a-crown for you."

The boy seized the money and sped down the path, glad to have got out of the difficulty so easily. Garfitt knew he was not likely to say that he had given it to the wrong person. That would mean a beating, and Solomon boys, like most others, do not go out of their way to court personal chastisement.

Then, with the assistance of a fresh bottle of brandy, he set himself to think out his own course of action. What should he do? How should he punish these two? Ah! the thought that had struck him when he sent the message. He would meet this man himself and be revenged on him. It would mean a walk of nearly a quarter of a mile, but surely he could manage that for such an end? He hugged the thought to his heart. He would shoot Darniac and then turn *her* out of his house. Thus would he punish both.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in drinking brandy and in gloating over his scheme. Unperceived by Céleste, he got out his revolver, cleaned it, loaded it carefully, and deposited it

in his pocket. Then the evening meal came, but though he sat up to it, he was too excited to eat. His face burned feverishly, and as Céleste noticed it, she became greatly alarmed. The same constraint still sat upon them, except that now Garfitt was mockingly polite to her. She could not understand it at all; the only conclusion she could come to was that his disease must be preying on his mind, and for that reason he was not accountable for his actions. She resolved to watch him closely.

To this end, when he rose and went into the verandah, she kept her eye upon him from the room. It was almost dark, but she saw him take something from his pocket, examine it carefully, and replace it. Then descending the steps, he headed round the hill in an easterly direction. Without any head covering, she followed him, creeping from tree to tree, and taking extraordinary care lest he should discover that he was being watched. His progress was very slow, for he had to stop on an average once in every fifty yards to recover his breath. He reeled as he went, and sometimes he had to support himself by rocks and trees, but eventually he left the bushes and emerged on the open spot where she herself had met Darniac by appoint-

ment only a fortnight before. He seated himself on a rock, and as he did so, a ship's bell in the harbour struck eight o'clock. Again she saw him take something from his pocket, and then like a flash his errand dawned upon her. He was going to commit suicide! In another moment she would have rushed across the open to him, but as she was about to start, a man emerged from the shadow on the other side and approached him. It was Darniac.

Crouching in her hiding place, she listened and watched with her heart in her mouth. She saw her husband rise and stagger towards the other. She saw Darniac lift his hat politely.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, "but I must own that I am at a loss to understand its meaning. Were you the sender of that message?"

"I was," Garfitt replied, "and I sent it in reply to this letter."

He took a paper from his pocket and spread it on the rock.

"How did you obtain possession of that?"

"I intercepted your messenger."

"And now?"

"Now I am going to settle the matter with you. So you think you will take my wife away with you, do you?"

"That is my intention!"

"And you dare own it to my face?"

"I dare."

"By God! You're a pluckier man than I took you for! Do you know you're standing face to face with Death?"

"You dare not touch me!"

"We'll see. You think my wife loves you?"

"That is not the question at issue."

"Isn't it? I think it is! At any rate we'll make it so!"

"I cannot stay here wrangling with you."

"What time does your boat sail?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Then you'll never catch it."

"What do you mean?"

"That you'll never leave this place alive. You cur! You traitorous hound! I know you! I know you, and I'll put a stop to your adulterous tricks! Hold up your hands and say your prayers, for as certain as you live now, I'm going to blow your brains out!"

Garfitt pointed the revolver. Darniac instantly stepped back a pace and threw up his hands as he had been ordered. Céleste still crouched behind her bush, unable to move hand or foot. A night bird hooted in the tree above

her, but save his dismal note, and the ripple of the waves upon the beach, not a sound was to be heard.

"I'll count twenty and then fire. Say your prayers, for you're as good as dead!"

"You won't shoot an unarmed man!"

"Say your prayers, I tell you. I don't want to hear your voice."

The waves rippled on the beach and the voice of a man singing came faintly up from a lugger in the bay.

"Time's up — now I fire!"

He raised his hand, but as he did so a great wave of something seemed to break over him. His brain reeled and he lost his sense of perspective. He pulled the trigger — the bullet flew high above the other's head, and Garfitt fell to the ground in a dead faint.

As soon as he realized what had happened, Darniac turned upon his heel and ran as fast as his legs could carry him along the beach in the direction of the Township.

When the noise of his flight had died away, Céleste came out of hiding and approached her husband. He was still unconscious, and for a moment she thought him dead. Then with almost superhuman strength she picked him up

in her arms, and started round the hill side towards the house. Reeling and staggering under her burden she bore him on, the light from the sitting-room guiding and encouraging her. It seemed hours before she reached it. When she did, she laid him on his bed, and began the work of restoring him to life. It was some time before any sign of animation returned. Then his eyes opened and he gazed about him in a dazed fashion.

"How did I get here?" he faltered.

"I carried you."

"Ah! I remember. I missed my shot. Now pack up your traps and join that paramour of yours. Go!"

She threw herself on her knees beside him.

"You cannot mean that you doubt me still?"

"Go, I say! Do you want me to shoot you too?"

"I will not go!"

"Then I'll go myself and leave you here."

"No! No! You must not move. You will kill yourself! Oh, what can I say to stop you?"

She clung to him with the strength of despair.

"Let me go! I will not live under the same roof with you!"

He tried to force her off, but she still clung

to him. At last her grasp weakened; she rose to her feet. Her voice was very hard and curiously thick.

"No! No! You must not move. You are quite right. Since you are so unjust it is better that I *should* go!"

And so saying she turned away and went down the steps into the darkness. Garfitt's head fell back upon the pillow. Another fainting fit was coming over him. He felt himself sinking.

"She is gone! This is the end. Now let me die!"

CHAPTER IX

A DAY LATER

"Humanum amare est, humanum autem ignoscere est."

— PLAUTUS.

WHEN Garfitt came to his senses again it was broad daylight, and he was surprised to find the Padre sitting by his bedside watching him intently. As soon as he had recovered himself sufficiently to speak, he asked the reason of this visit.

"Garfitt," was the uncompromising answer, "I am here to tell you that you have done your wife a grievous wrong!"

"My wife? I have no wife — you don't seem to know that I have cast her off!"

"I am quite aware of it, and I also know that you will receive her back when you have heard her story."

"Never! And what's more, don't you inter-

fered. I know my own business best, and I've had good proof of her treachery!"

"I tell you you have had no such thing. What you believe is simply the outcome of your own wicked jealousy. She has never failed one iota in her duty or her love; she is as true to you as she ever was!"

"How do you know what she is? Has she made you her confidante?"

"She has! No, don't sneer like that. She came to me late last night, nearly broken hearted, with the news that you had cast her off."

"She told the truth for once — I have!"

"And you will take her back?"

"I have told you already I will not! So let's drop the subject!"

"But I must not be put off like that. Think, Garfitt. You loved her once. You told me you loved her better than all the world, and yet on the first opportunity you doubt her. Is that loving better than all the world? If so, I pity you! Listen man, you are dying. No, it's no use blinking the fact."

"Who wants to? Not I, for certain!"

"You will not die with this great injustice on your soul?"

"I tell you it is not an injustice. I'm not

to be blinded by falsehoods. I know what I'm doing. God knows I have not acted without sufficient reason. Why, I intercepted a letter from that man to her only yesterday."

"A letter?"

"Yes, a letter in which he said that the climax had come, and that he had made arrangements for them to sail together in the China Mail-boat last night."

"It is more serious than I thought. However, I can account for that to your satisfaction. Remember, I have heard your wife's history from her own lips."

"I am glad she makes a stranger the repository of her secrets!"

"Garfitt, do you believe that I am a God-fearing man?"

"Well, yes! Now I come to think of it, strangely enough, I do!"

"Well then, will you accept my honest conviction when I say that, before God, I believe the story your wife has told me to be true in every particular?"

"Yes, I think I will even go as far as that!"

"Then, Garfitt, you must hear it also! I have sworn to you I believe her innocent. Will you see her once more and hear her story from her

own lips before you condemn her? She loves you with her whole heart and soul. No man was ever loved more truly than Céleste loves you. Ask yourself, would she be so anxious to remain with you now if she did not? If she had loved this other man, as you think she did, would she have allowed him to go away from her so willingly?"

"I cannot say — I have given her a home. I have a little money which will be hers at my death."

"You are worse than ungenerous. If money and a home were all she wanted, Darniac could have given her both. No, Garfitt, that is no reason. Now, as a favour to me, the only one I have ever asked of you, will you see her?"

"I can't! I can't! You don't know what you are asking of me!"

"Good heavens, man, are you so blind to your own interests? If you hesitate now you are lost for ever! Ponder it well. She has been an angel of mercy to you, and you are repaying it by breaking her heart. For my own part I think it would serve you right if she refused to have anything more to do with you. You have been fuddling yourself with drink this fortnight past. You have been imagining all

sorts of infidelities against her. Remember how she nursed you. What have you given her in return? Why, you have neglected her shamefully, and now you have put a finishing touch to it all by this unjust suspicion. But hers is no ordinary love. Like the generous woman she is, she is willing to forgive everything. Does that not show the nobility of her character? Come, Garfitt, I am pleading with you for her. Will you see her?"

There was a long silence.

"Yes, I will see her."

"Thank God! I will bring her to you at once."

The Padre left the house, and Garfitt was once more alone. In the interval of waiting he tried to think out his position; but try how he would to drive it out, he only seemed to see Céleste's tearful face gazing at him in mute reproach. A sudden but awful terror was upon him. What if he should have misjudged her? Could she be innocent? True, there was something in the Padre's argument. But, on the other hand, there was that damning letter as evidence against her! There was no time, however, to think of anything. He heard a rustling in the verandah — a figure came between him

and the light, and next moment Céleste was by his side. She threw herself on her knees, and hid her face in the coverlet of the bed.

"Céleste!"

"Oh, John, my husband, thank God you will hear my story?"

"I have promised that I will. You had better begin."

"Oh, John, John, I am a guilty, wicked woman, and I never thought I should be called upon to tell you of my shame. But to you I am innocent of any wrong. You will believe that, won't you, and take me back — oh, John, you will take me back?"

"Let me hear your story!"

She rose from her knees and leant against the table. A desperate, hunted look had come into her face, and her voice had suddenly grown very hard.

"You shall know everything. It has been my folly in keeping it back so long that has wrought this mischief between us. You will despise me and drive me away when you hear, but that must be my punishment."

"Begin!"

"On our wedding night you asked me about my life. I told you I was born in Rouen —

that I acted as companion to a lady in Paris — that when I left her I came to Australia.”

She paused with almost a choke in her voice. Her lips were dry and cracked, and her hands were white with the violence of her grip upon the table edge.

“Well?”

“I did not tell you who that woman was. I did not tell you what she made of me. But I will now. Have you ever heard of Marie Recardier?”

“The diamond thief — the most notorious adventuress unhung! I nearly went to see her tried the last time I was in Paris. My God, Céleste, what had you to do with her?”

“Can’t you guess? I am Mar—”

“No more! No more! For pity’s sake, no more! I can guess the rest.”

“But you must hear me out—I tell you, you must! There can be no mercy for either of us in this explanation. If it pains you to hear, think how it must hurt me to tell. Do not stop me, let me say it. Yes, I am Marie Recardier, the Diamond Thief, the woman you have just called ‘the greatest adventuress unhung.’ You should have gone to see her tried — then you would have known her when you met me on

the road that awful day little more than two months ago. In that case you would not have taken me in, and this misery would never have come upon us."

"Don't! For pity's sake, don't talk so! Tell me no more! I forgive you everything, but don't cut into my heart like this!"

"I cannot stop — I must not. It is best for both of us that this understanding should be complete in every way. I say, if you had come to see me tried you would have heard me condemned to transportation for fifteen years. Yes, I — the delicately nurtured woman — she whom you have called your guardian angel, the purest soul that ever lived, was condemned to penal servitude for fifteen years — sent across the seas in the company of all the lowest scum of France! Can you guess how I suffered? Can you guess how I ate my heart out on that Pacific island? No, no, of course you can't!"

"Go on! Go on! Don't stop till you have finished, if it kills me."

"Darniac was the organiser of all our schemes. He discovered that they could do nothing without me. For this reason he resolved to help me to escape. Money was sent; with it I effected certain bribes, and at length, after in-

numerable dangers, I eluded the vigilance of the authorities and reached Australia. Bit by bit I made my way north, resolved not only to outwit the law, but also to escape my friends. For, as you may imagine, I had no desire to go back to that old life again. But the bribes had been very heavy, and my money was soon exhausted. What was worse, I knew the Police might be on my track at any moment. A boat was sailing for England, I boarded her in Brisbane, and hid myself among the cargo. My presence was not discovered until we had left Cooktown, and then, more dead than alive, I was forced by hunger to quit my shelter. Can you imagine what I suffered? Think how I felt the insults that were heaped upon me?"

Not being able to speak he tried to take her hand. But in this he was unsuccessful. She kept it beyond his reach.

"When I was put ashore I was destitute of everything. Hope seemed completely gone out of the world for me. I wandered about the island, expecting every moment to feel an arresting hand upon my shoulder. When night fell I made my way down to the jetty yonder, looked at the dark water, and longed to throw myself over and be done with my misery for ever.

But when it came to the point I had not sufficient bravery, so I went back to the hill and cried myself to sleep under a tree. Next day I could have fought the world for a crust of bread, but I dared not venture into the settlement lest I should be met and recognised. Then you came into my life and helped me. The only person who had ever done so. You gave me all you had in the world, and I would have given my life for you in return."

"There is no need to speak of that."

"There is every need. It is one of the only happy recollections of my life. Do you know, when you left me, I went up on to the hill side again, and prayed that if there were a God, He would bless you for that act of charity. I thought I should never see you again, but Fate willed otherwise. You offered me a home and I took it. You fell ill and I gave my whole being up to nursing you. I resolved that come what might I would make you happy in return for the pity you had shown to me. How I learnt to love you, you know. My life then was a glimpse of Heaven. Can you guess my happiness in the Home I was building up for myself? And when I became your wife, my joy seemed complete, my old life faded behind

me till it was little more than a horrible dream. Then Darniac came hunting for me."

"Ah!"

"He traced me here and demanded that I should return to France with him. I refused—I told him I would not leave you. You were the first who had ever really loved me. You had given me a home. As your wife I was building up for myself a new and happy life of love and honour. No! I would not go back with him to that old desperate existence. He threatened to communicate with the police if I persisted in my refusal. At length, driven to desperation, I made a bargain with him, by which I promised if he would let me stay with you—until—until the end, to go away with him and do their will afterwards. But I never meant to go. I should have shot myself when they came to claim me. Oh, yes! I could have been brave enough then I assure you. Well, for a fortnight he remained watching me, then suddenly news reached him. It became necessary for him to change his plans and to leave for Hong Kong at once. He wanted to force me into going with him, in fact he had made all his arrangements to that end. The Padre tells me he wrote to me."

"I intercepted the letter, and it was on that I acted."

"Oh! If only I had got it this misery would have been averted! Now you know all. I have been a thief — a convicted felon — but by my love for you I swear I have never sinned in anything else. You are my judge — pronounce sentence on me!"

"Hush — hush — you don't know what you are saying!"

"You cannot forgive me then?"

"I have no right to speak to you, much less to forgive. I am only the vilest wretch alive. Oh, Céleste, is it too late for me to say how bitterly I hate myself for my behaviour to you — too late to ask for your forgiveness?"

"You forgive me?"

"What have I to forgive? Nothing! It is you who have suffered. Think of all you have done for me, and remember how I have treated you. How can I look you in the face!"

"But are you certain, now you have heard my story, that you can still love me?"

"Your story? What has that to do with me? Am I so guiltless that I can throw the first stone? No! Were you twenty thousand times guiltier you would still be the same

Céleste to me! Oh! My love! My love! I thought I had lost you!"

He stroked her hair. She was crying softly.

His face was very drawn and haggard, and he gasped convulsively for breath. It needed but little medical knowledge to see that the excitement of the last two days had materially hastened the end. It was very near now.

Presently Garfitt fell asleep holding her hand. This slumber lasted for nearly an hour, and during the whole of that time the woman did not move a finger lest she might disturb him. When he opened his eyes again it was nearly mid-day. He seemed slightly stronger, and his voice when he spoke had almost a firmness in it. He appeared also to be happier than he had been for some time past.

"Céleste," he said, looking into her face, "I have had such a happy dream!"

"Will you tell it to me?"

"My dear, I don't know that I could make you understand. It was so vivid and yet so mysterious, so terrible and yet so full of happiness for me. Its influence is on me even now. As far as I can remember, it seemed that I was standing in a valley among great mountains which towered up and up to such a height above me

that their summits were lost in the clouds. How I came to be there I cannot tell, but I know that I was quite alone and very sad. I seemed to be the most friendless and homeless being in the whole world. And how I was to get out of this valley in which I was lost I could not tell. I looked to right and left of me for a road, but none was to be seen. I went on and on, searching always, till at last my eyes lighted on a tiny path away to the left of where I stood. It was only a little, rough, uneven track, but by it I climbed up and up, through jungle and by rocks, scaling overhanging crags and leaping chasms, till I stood right out on the face of the great mountain. Then the way began to grow more difficult, rocks blocked the passage; on one hand was the sheer side of the hill, on the other the awful precipice. And, what made it still more awesome, the wind was rising and shrieking round me. Oh, Céleste, the loneliness of that place was terrible. I seemed afraid to go on, and yet something behind would not allow me to turn back. My heart was sick with fear, my hands and feet were bleeding from the sharpness of the rocks by which I climbed, and yet every moment the path was growing narrower and more difficult,

and the depth below me more fearful. At last I came to the most dangerous place of all. Here the track was little more than a foot wide; above me still towered the steep side of the mountain; to my left was the abyss. I dared not look down into it and I could not look up. My courage began to fail me. I trembled for my safety, for I knew that the name of that place was Death. Then, just as my strength was leaving me and I was despairing of ever reaching safety again, the tiniest white cloud imaginable descended from Heaven to settle on the path before me. I looked at it, and as I looked it grew and grew, and as it grew it took human shape. And yet it was not human, for I saw that it had great white wings, and a glorious halo round its head. Then I realized that it was a woman, an Angel woman sent to guide me along the path of Death. She signified with her white hand that I should follow her, and I did so, this time without fear. On and on she led me. The path grew more and more difficult as we went, but upheld by her hand I had no fear.

"Then, little by little, the path changed again. It was growing broader; the depth was not so vast, and now there was grass upon the mountain

slope. Then suddenly we came to a standstill, and my Angel bade me look. I did so, and there, Céleste, stretching before me, was the most beautiful valley the brain of man could imagine. Its extent was so vast that my sight could not take it all in; upon it grew every manner of tree and shrub; glimpses of lakes showed here and there, and among the foliage I saw men and women walking, and beckoning to me, with looks of love upon their faces, to join them. But that was not all, for over everything was the softest and most wonderful light I ever dreamed of, and in the centre of that light a throne, and on that throne One whose face was as the Morning Glory. My Guardian Angel pointed to the valley and to Him who sat upon the throne, and told me, though I knew it already, that the name of that place was Heaven. I implored her to take me to it. But she only said, 'Soon! Very soon!' And then for the first time she turned her face towards me, and I realized who my angel was. Her face was yours, Céleste! You came to me and I was no longer afraid. I have known the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Your love has led me along the Path of Difficulty — your hand has upheld me in the Places of Destruction.

tion. God sent you out of Heaven to teach me to believe. My blindness is removed, my eyes are opened. I seem to see everything plainly now. Céleste, there is a God — I am convinced of it. I have seen His face, and I know that, sinner though I am, He will forgive. I do believe — I am not afraid to die — I trust to Him, and I know that He will let you bring me to the White Valley of the glorious Life to Come!"

CHAPTER X

THE NINETIETH DAY

"Conquer we shall, but we must first contend;
'Tis not the fight that crowns us, but the end."

— HERRICK.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since Darniac's departure from the Island, and every day discovered Garfitt growing unmistakably weaker. He could do nothing for himself now. From morning till night he lay on the couch in the verandah, watching the shimmering heat-haze on the plain, and the luggers riding at anchor in the Harbour, and living only in his Memories of the Past. A great silence was slowly settling on the house; and even his friends in the Township seemed to be aware that the end was very near, for only the Padre came to visit him.

It was an intensely hot morning — hardly a breath of air fanned his cheeks. Not a leaf of the Palms moved, only the usual blinding glare was upon and over everything. Céleste sat by his

side sewing; but though she pretended to work it was little that she accomplished. She had been reading to him earlier, but now even the exertion of listening tired him, and so the book lay open upon the floor with a wavering line of small black ants crawling across the printed page. Garfitt noticed them and smiled faintly. He was full of the significance of little things. He was a cherisher of books, and he knew that if he had been well, that volume would not have been lying there. Now so small a circumstance was beneath consideration. From the ant trail he looked at his wife—thought of her history, and of all she had been to him. In the mysterious Future, that Future that was to begin when he had gone, what was her fate to be?

"Céleste," he said at length, "do you think that man will harm you to revenge himself on me?"

"No!" she answered. "Do not worry about that. He dares not hurt me for his own sake. I know far too much about him!"

"But you will not go back to them when I am gone?"

"No! I promise you I will not!"

"Then what will you do?"

"I do not know. But we will not talk of it.

You must not agitate yourself. You are not strong enough."

"But I must know! It is a continual nightmare to me to think of your wandering about the earth alone, remember it will not do for you to go back to France; while in Australia, so near your enemies, you will be in constant danger."

"Hush! Hush! I am not going to let you talk!"

"You are very obstinate!"

"It is only because I love you!"

He turned his head and looked away across the harbour. The Missionary Schooner from New Guinea lay becalmed five cables from her anchorage. There was not wind enough to fill her topsails. The report of a gun echoed from Prince of Wales Island, and rumbled like thunder among the islands. The hammering of a boat builder came up from the beach, and he could see two little native boys bathing opposite the old burying ground. A little cloud of dust was on the path leading towards the house, and presently, when it settled down, Garfitt made out the figure of a man, dressed in white, coming up the hill. He watched him with a dreamy sort of fascination. Somehow

his destiny seemed to be wrapped up in the dust he was creating. Try how he would he could not withdraw his eyes from that little cloud. It came nearer, and when the walker emerged from among the Castor Oil bushes, Garfitt saw that he was a stranger. He was a big, burly man with iron grey hair and a close cropped beard of the same colour. As he left the bushes and entered the open space before the house, he turned and looked back at the settlement. It was a long climb, and Garfitt settled it in his own mind that he was a little out of breath. Presently he continued his walk and approached the verandah. He came up the steps, and seeing a man lying on the couch, and a woman by his side, raised his hat politely, saying —

“Mr. Garfitt, I presume?”

“Yes, my name is Garfitt — what can I do for you? Will you excuse my rising, I am not very strong.”

“Certainly! I want the favour of a few moments’ private conversation with you, if you will allow it me.”

“With pleasure. You may go on. I have no secrets from my wife!”

“In this case, however, I fear I must ask you

to break through your rule. What I have to say to you must be strictly private."

Céleste rose and went into the house. A curious faintness had suddenly come over her. Her legs trembled under her, and she was hardly conscious of her actions. What could this stern man have to say to her husband that she must not hear? It could not be anything about her? No! No! Of course not! But if it should be? She clutched at the table for support. Through the slits of the green shutters she could see them together. The man, who had taken the chair she had just vacated, fascinated her like a snake.

Garfitt opened the conversation.

"Now you can go on. I am at a loss to understand what you can have to say to me that my wife must not hear?"

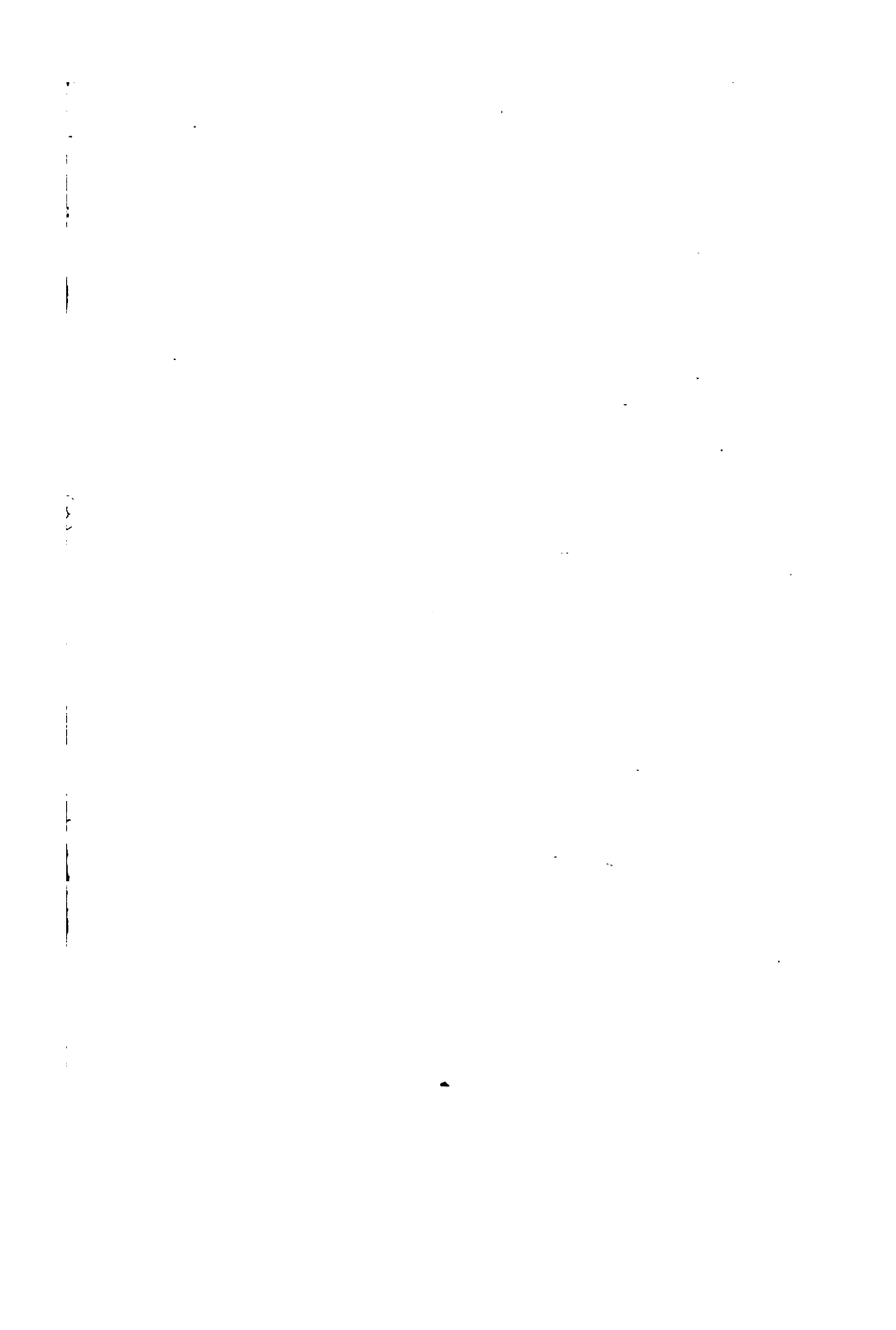
"Mr. Garfitt, you must prepare yourself for some bad news."

"I am quite prepared. Go on. About whom do you wish to speak to me?"

"About your wife!"

Garfitt's face set deadly hard. He gasped for breath. Inside the room the woman was straining her face against the shutters.

He signed to the man to go on.





She half stood, half crouched, against the window.

"I am sorry that I should be the bearer of such news, but I have no option. My instructions are peremptory."

Garfitt managed to find sufficient voice to say —

"What of my wife? Go on!"

"You are not perhaps aware of your wife's history?"

"I am quite aware. Go on!"

"You know that she is an escapée from New Caledonia?"

"I know it!"

"Then prepare yourself for what I am about to tell you!"

Garfitt nodded his head feebly.

"I am here for the purpose of arresting her!"

The woman in the room heard every word, but she could not withdraw her eyes. She half stood, half crouched against the window, unable to move hand or foot. Garfitt's face expressed the intensity of his agony. What could he do? How could he let her know that she must fly? The man had seen her. The island was so small — there was no escape. He half raised himself — at any risk he must warn her.

"What are you going to do?" the man asked.

"I must go into the house. I am not well."

"You are going to warn her. Lie still. It would be useless. Every chance of escape is cut off!"

"Oh! My God!"

All his agony broke loose; his head fell back upon the pillow. Then something seemed to snap inside him, a violent fit of coughing ensued, and a torrent of blood gushed from his lips. He rolled his head over to the other side, away from the gaze of the Police Officer. At least *he* should not see him die. The blood continued to pour from his lips and to drip upon the floor.

The Officer, realizing what had happened, sprang towards him. The woman inside the room still crouched against the wall. The world was spinning round and round her head at the rate of millions of miles a second. She heard the steady drip—drip—upon the verandah floor as in a dream; she saw through half closed eyes the stranger's excitement. She heard him cross the verandah and come towards the room where she stood. But before he could enter she had roused herself, turned towards a small table, wrenched open the drawer, taken something from it, and secreted it inside the bosom of her dress. Then she heard

his voice speaking to her, she saw him standing before her, but she hardly realized what he said.

A moment later she was in the verandah bending over Garfitt's body. She was too late. *He was dead!*

From the door the Officer watched her. He saw her piteous despair; and, being, in spite of his calling, a humane man, he did not force his business upon her then. For some time they remained as they were. Then she rose to her feet, and, with a face that seemed to have aged ten years in those three minutes, turned and confronted him. Her voice was hard and passionless as steel.

"Now I suppose you are going to arrest me?"

"My poor soul, I have no option!"

"You call me 'poor soul,' then you are not entirely without heart? Think of all he was to me. Will you let me have five minutes alone with him first?"

"Yes! I will wait for you here."

He went back into the room, and she dropped into her former position beside the couch. The blood still dripped on to the floor, slowly—drop by drop. Taking one of the poor, thin hands in hers, she pressed it to her lips and

kissed it passionately, calling to him by every name of love to speak to her. Suddenly she heard the noise of a man running up the path. His steps were coming closer and closer. Who was it? What further agony was in store for her? The five minutes had nearly expired. She heard her captor rise from his chair and enter the verandah. Another moment and it would be too late! Could she be brave enough? Yes, yes, of course she could. So taking something from her dress, she pointed it, and pulled the trigger. There was a report, a little gasp, a sort of choking cough, and the body of Céleste fell to the floor shot through the heart.

Instantly the Police Officer was at her side. But he was too late, his prisoner had escaped him! The man running up the path had stopped on hearing the shot; now he came on faster than before. It was the Padre, without hat or coat. He entered the verandah, and when he saw what it contained, fell back against the wall, paralysed with horrified amazement. Then turning a questioning face towards the stranger who was kneeling by the woman's side, he whispered hoarsely —

“I don't know who you are, but I conjure you to tell me what this means!”

"Can't you see?" said the other, "it means Death!"

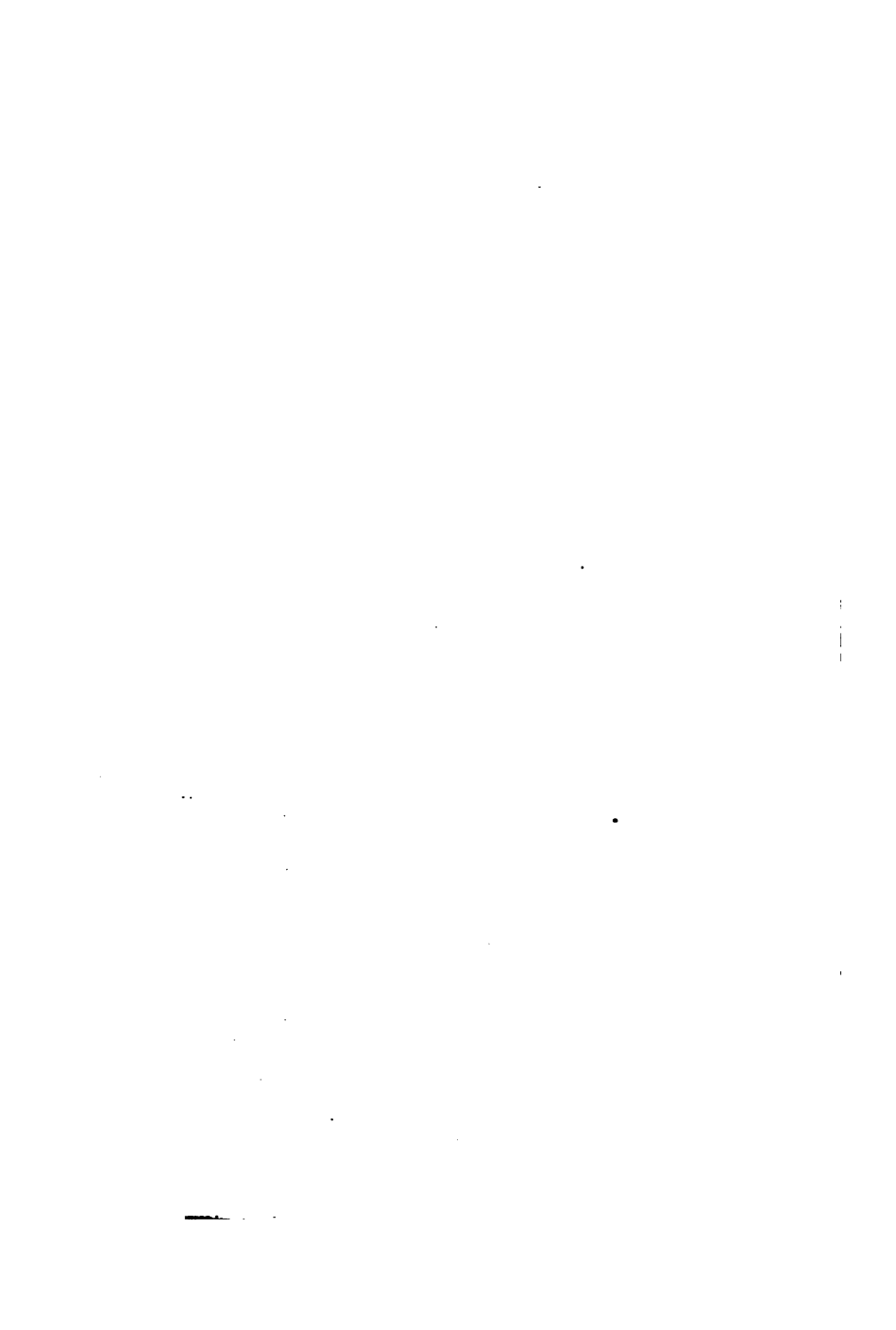
"How did it happen?"

"The man from natural causes. The woman by her own hand!"

The two men looked at each other in awed silence.

Then the big, green frog "Destiny," croaked in one of the empty rooms!

THE END



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